5-2017

# The Lived Experiences of Position Specialists in a Team Sport Environment

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Allison Brooke Smith entitled "The Lived Experiences of Position Specialists in a Team Sport Environment." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Kinesiology and Sport Studies.

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# The Lived Experiences of Position Specialists in a Team Sport Environment

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Allison Brooke Smith

May 2017

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved fiancé, mother, and father who have given me endless support, love, and pushed me to believe in myself through this process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the following people for their help through my doctoral program and the dissertation process:

First and foremost, thank you to my fiancé Kyle Brady. Kyle you have no idea what your love, support, and encouragement has meant through this process. Thank you for the shoulder to cry on when it was difficult, the kick in the butt when I needed motivation, and celebrating each and every triumph with me as if it was your own. I do not know where I would be without you. I love you.

Secondly, thank you to my family- my mother, father, brother, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and dear friends. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for encouraging me on this journey. A very special thank you to my mother who has always seen and believed me to be the strong, capable, and independent woman that I am today.

Thirdly, thank you to my dissertation committee, my advisor and chair Dr. Hardin, Dr. Waller, Dr. Whiteside, and Dr. Zakrajsek. Thank you for pushing me to be a better writer, scholar, and academic through this process. A special thank you to my advisor Dr. Hardin that has guided me through this PhD process and never ceased to believe in my ability and gave me the freedom to study and research what I desired and had a passion for.

Fourthly, thank you Dr. Cannon, Dr. Teague, Liz Biggerstaff, and Coach Caddigan for all you did for me at Wingate. Without the Bulldog community and your continued care, I wouldn't have pursued this degree.

Finally, a very special thank you to my research partner extraordinaire, Lizzy. I do not know where I would be without your mentorship. I have fed and continue to feed off your passion for research and the aspiration to make this world a better place.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to discover the lived-experiences of position specialists in a team sport environment. Participants were intercollegiate male and female specialists (pitchers, kickers, punters, and goalies; N = 21) who were enrolled and participating in Division I, II, and III college sport (softball, baseball, football, women's soccer, men's soccer, women's lacrosse, men's hockey, and women's hockey) at institutions throughout the South, Midwest, and Northeast. Interviews were conducted in person and via the phone with participants.

Interview transcripts were transcribed and then analyzed using grounded theory approach of collapsing codes down into categories or themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011. Analysis of interviews rendered unique findings to position specialists such as highly individualized practices, elevated pressure and an unforgiving role, a high mental approach despite adversity, and a lack of role understanding. The findings also revealed the importance of positive team culture, family support, and the foundation that sport provided in the athletes' lives. These findings could expand the definition of specialization to include position specialist and provide implications for team and organizational culture, as well as provide a platform and need for sport psychology consultants.

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

At the age of 12, I decided my goal and focus was to pitch and play softball in college. I had played softball, other sports, and even other positions, but once I had my first pitching lesson I was hooked. Every decision I made from the day I took my first lesson moving forward was highly calculated and intentional to give me the best opportunity to pitch at the intercollegiate level. In high school I began taking lessons two to three times a week, pitching daily in some capacity, lifting weights three to four times a week, and running almost eight miles daily. My feet hit the pavement every morning and every evening, four miles at a time.

I resisted parties, staying out late with friends, high school football games, and dances all in an effort to get more sleep, recover, or train in hopes of gaining an edge.

My social life was almost non-existent and my interactions with others revolved purely around pitching and softball. Research has shown this is not uncommon; many intercollegiate athletes feel a strain to develop and maintain relationships outside of their sport, and this was no different for me in high school (Anderson, 2002). I joined elite travel showcase teams that played in tournaments that purposely placed their athletes on the field in front of college coaches. These tournaments were jam packed every weekend of each summer from early May to late August. This seemingly created an atmosphere where all vacations and experiences to revolve around driving, staying, and attending softball tournaments across the country. However, during that time I never thought of my experience as limited because my goal was achieved. I received an athletic scholarship and an offer to pitch in college at the Division I level.

In college, that all changed. Alone. Many times as an intercollegiate athlete I remember my experience as being alone. I ran alone. Pitched alone. Lifted alone. Yes, many times I had fellow pitchers in the bullpen with me, but we never had an inclusive relationship. There was

always a level of caution or competitiveness that kept us all from interacting with one another. I never had a coach designated to work with me as a pitcher. My practice routine was completely self-motivated and directed except for coordinating them with my catcher. If I had questions I had to look within myself for the tactical knowledge or try to discuss strategies and techniques with my father over the phone two states away. Although this isolation was sometimes calming during a long distance run or a session of throwing in the bullpen, many times this isolation left me feeling distant from my teammates both on and off the field. Similar to an athlete's isolation felt on college campuses compared to their peers, I felt isolation and a lack of connection within my own team (Anderson, 2002, Hardin & Pate, 2013; Shofner & Schutz, 2004).

Maybe this isolation made me better and more focused. My statistics and performance over my three-year career certainly reflect that. But maybe I wasn't better once I left. I felt only a small connection with my head coach and zero connection with the revolving door of assistant coaches I had experienced. My relationships with teammates quickly fizzled after the common denominator of playing on the same team evaporated. These feelings haunted me and shaped me for the years to come. I tried to avoid reunions, alumni parties, softball functions, and the sport of softball in general. This always left me wondering was this isolation I felt due to my own personality or due to my unique situation as a pitcher? Or lack of formation of a relationship with my coaches and teammates? All of these questions that I felt propelled me to research and create discussion around key elements I wanted to discover: Is there such thing as position specialization? Does it affect team cohesion and culture? Are there positives or negatives that accompany this possible phenomenon?

**Rationale of the Study**

Like many research projects, the conception of this dissertation stems from a personal experience that was discussed in such detail that it has led to a research interest. This study seeks to uncover the experiences of a specific population within intercollegiate sport: position specialists in a team sport environment. There is limited research on position specialization and the players who specialize in a specific position within a team sport environment. This study expands the definition of specialization to include position specialists and demonstrate possible benefits to sport specialization that have yet to be found in the current body of literature. If negative factors are discovered such as feelings of isolation, identity issues, or lack of relationship development outside of sport, implications and suggestions could be made to create a more inclusive environment for these student-athletes. These implications could also be applied to human resources. It is important for student-athletes to develop positive leadership and team skills needed to transfer to the work force after leaving their sporting environment.

Based on the exploration of the sport specialization literature of what sport specialization is, the stages, benefits, and detriments, there is a need to explore athletes that have specialized in a certain position within their sport to understand their experience and how it adds to the body of sport specialization literature. Since there is a lack of research on what position specialization is and entails, it is important for this study to ask questions to participants that can aid in discovering the phenomenon of position specialization. Most of the sport specialization literature has focused on why student-athletes should not specialize on a particular sport (i.e., injury, burnout, stress). This study takes this concept a step further by focusing on position specialization in a specific sport. This study seeks to discover what and if position specialization exists and capture the experience with specializing in a sport and a specific position within a

sport. This study has an impact on overall team cohesion. It is important for positive team culture to ensure that all members of the team feel included, needed, and fulfilled in their unique roles.

**Research Questions**

RQ1: What are the lived-experiences of position specialists in a team sport environment?

RQ2: What contexts or situations have impacted or influenced their experiences of position specialization?

RQ3: How has the occurrence of position specialization affected their experience of team culture/ team dynamics?

# CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## Sport Specialization

**Introduction to sport specialization**. To begin to understand the phenomenon of sport specialization, an individual must first understand the concept of socialization and how it affects sport participation. According to Coakley (2009) socialization is "the process of learning and social development which occurs, as well as interacts with one another and become acquainted with the social world in which we live" (p. 90). In other words, humans socialize, gain knowledge and insight, and experience different thoughts, beliefs, and cultures all by interactions with one another. For socialization, it is important to not only recognize the individuals involved, but also the context and the result from that socialization.

Sport is one of the most prevalent contexts for socialization. Sports allows for interactions between athletes and their peers, athletes and coaches and or parents, parents and coaches, and parents and other parents. However, all of sport socialization centers around the athlete; athletes are influenced by the agents of socialization or those closest to them, typically parents, family, coaches, and peers (Coakley, 2009). These agents of socialization all influence the athlete to inherently connect, learn, and share their attitudes, values, and beliefs (Coakley, 2009). In other words, sports provide a platform for role learning. Particularly, young athletes are given opportunities through sport to learn about relationships inside and outside of that sport context, learn to think for themselves, as well as part of a team, and acquire proper societal behaviors (Greendorfer, 2001; Coakley, 2004; Parks, Quarterman, & Thibault, 2007).

Athletes link into a community that shares the values of participation in sport, develop a commitment to that sport, develop social relationships, and create an identity related to that particular sport (Coakley, 2009). For example, in a study of an elite women's hockey team in

Canada, Theberge (1999, 2000) found that due to the women's commitment and success on the ice, the participants developed a close connection or community with one another based on their shared love and experience with ice hockey. Due to this socialization process through sports, sports can have many positive attributes that contribute to life skills including persistence, teamwork, leadership, and character development (Baron, 2007). Sports can contribute to role, societal, and community development (Coakley, 2004).

Since sport is such an influential factor in many children and young adults lives, sport specialization provides a unique scope to explore sport socialization. Despite the support and opposition for sport specialization in the sport psychology literature, sport specialization does allow athletes to experience commitment, learn values, and develop relationships and identity, just within a singular and specific sport context. Through the exploration of sport socialization and its effects on sport participants, it is not surprising that sport specialization is one of the more researched and popular topics in sport management and sport psychology fields.

**Sport specialization defined.** In the sport management and sport psychology fields, sport specialization and specifically youth specialization has been highly explored. There has been a trend in the recent decades towards more awareness of what sport specialization is, its parts, and the benefits and detriments not only for the players, but coaches, and parents. Specifically, sport specialization is defined as when an athlete commits to play, train, and compete year round exclusively in one sport (Baker, 2003; Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009; Baker, Cobley, &Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Coakley 2010; Grupe, 1985; Kaleth & Mikesky; 2010; Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick, & LaBalla, 2013; Malina, 2010; Torres; 2015; Wiersma, 2000). Sport specialization includes three to four hours of practice per day at least five times a week, as well as competitions and tournaments on the weekends (Kaleth & Mikesky, 2010).

Early specialization is categorized when an athlete narrows their focus to a single sport between 6-12 years old (Wiersma, 2000). This narrow focus of sport specialization is characterized by the fact that children start sport at a very early age (3-6), they narrow their focus early to one sport instead of continuing to sample various sports and activities, the training is vigorous, purposeful, and highly intense, and there is the need to compete in elite competitions (i.e., regionals, nationals, and internationals; Baker, Côté, & Abernethy, 2003; Baker, Cobley, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Wall & Côté, 2007).

The sport specialization process is detailed in three different stages. These stages can be broken down into the sampling years, specialized years, and the investment years (Bloom 1985; Côté, 1999; Kalinowski, 1985; Monsaas, 1985). In the early stages of sport development, athletes are typically between the ages of 6-12. They sample a variety of sports, develop motor skills, and focus on the excitement and learning process of the sport (Côté, 1999). During the sampling years, parents likely discover the child's ability or gift for a certain sport or sports (Côté, 1999). In the second stage, the specialized years, typically ages 13-15, the athletes decrease their involvement in other extracurricular activities and focus on one or two sports due to the development of talent and positive value associated with the sport(s) (Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002). Finally, the investment years, beginning at age 16, are when the athletes pursue deliberate practice and competition. A small percentage of these adolescent athletes in the investment years then transition from playing high school or travel sport to elite sport competition in college or professional leagues.

**Myths about sport specialization.** While many parents, coaches, and administrators believe that early sport specialization leads to elite adult sport success, very little research has been found to support this claim (Bompa, 1995; Gould, 2010). In a study conducted by

Brouwers, De Bosscher, Schailleé, Truyuns, and Sotiriadou (2009) there was not a high correlation between their 3,000 junior tennis players ranking and later success in senior tournaments. Gould and Carson (2004) suggested that athletic talent couldn't be predicted at a young age; they warned against early specialization since each child learns, develops, and is motivated at different rates. Despite the appearance of successful early-specialized athletes, such as Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters, early specialization does not necessarily lead to intercollegiate scholarships, and elite, Olympic, or professional athlete status.

In a study conducted by the NCAA, out of the eight million high school athletes across the United States only 480,000 (6%) play sports in college at the Division I, II, or III level (NCAA Research, 2016). Only 2% of those athletes that play intercollegiate sports receive athletic scholarships (NCAA Recruiting Fact Sheet, 2016). The numbers are even more staggering for high school athletes to turn into professional athletes. Since baseball is the only major American sport allowed to draft directly from high school, many high profile players join the Major League of Baseball (MLB) without having to play in college first. However, the players that convert from high school to MLB are rare. One out of 200 (0.005%) high school baseball players per year are drafted (NCAA Research, 2016). According to the NCAA, the sport with the highest conversion of intercollegiate players to professional players occurs in basketball with 12.2% (NCAA Research, 2016). The other major professional sports have even lower conversions of intercollegiate to professional athletes with football (1.9%), women's basketball (4.7%), baseball (9.7%), men's soccer (1.4%), and men's ice hockey (6.6%; NCAA Research, 2016).

Just as there is the myth that sport specialization is essential for elite athletic careers, there is also the myth that sport specialization is crucial for a young athlete to develop properly

and efficiently in sport. There is research to support that sport specialization and early sport specialization in particular are in direct conflict with the diversity in motor skills, development, and athleticism that many coaches and successful professional athletes feel are keys to elite athletic achievement (Gould, 2010; Smith, 2015). In the past multiple sport athletes were sought after; these athletes were thought to obtain more versatility and well-rounded ability, skill, and athleticism (Smith, 2015; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). Sport diversification is based on this well-rounded approach. Sport diversification explains that athletes sample a variety of sports and emphasize a generalized physical training that focuses on basic skills and strategy so that the skills can be transferred across a wide spectrum of sports (Bodey, Judge, & Hoover, 2013; Brylinsky, 2010; McPhail & Kirk, 2006).

Sport diversification or early sampling of multiple sports is defined by the principle of deliberate play. Deliberate play is not about a number of repetitions or drills, but instead focuses on physical activities that promote problem-solving, strategy, and the idea that perceptional learning from other sports is transferrable (Berry, Abernethy, & Côté, 2008; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Gould & Carson, 2004). Research supports that deliberate play and early sampling allows young athletes to feel higher levels of enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, fewer injuries, and reduces dropout rate (Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Côté, 1999; Wiersma, 2000; Wright & Côté, 2003). In a study of minor league baseball players, 708 participants indicated they played more than one sport during the typical investment years of 15-18 and only 25% specialized before 15 years old (Ginsburg, et al., 2014). Ginsburg, et al., (2014) also found that early sampling led to higher athletic successes (i.e., 75% played intercollegiate baseball and all the participants were competing in professional minor leagues). However, due to the attention given to the myth that sport specialization is essential for success, the idea of sport

sampling or sport diversification throughout childhood and adolescence is not given the same attention, momentum, and value (Gould, 2010).

**Detriments of early sport specialization.** There are many reasons researchers advocate against early sport specialization. Some of the most cited reasons are due to burnout, dropout, pressure, and a lack of sport diversity, injury, and an over-identification with being an athlete. Competitive sport competitions allow athletes to showcase their talent and skill; however, for many athletes competing at a high level is a source of stress that can have negative repercussions such as burnout and or dropout. According to Coakley (1992) burnout occurs "when stress became so high and fun declined so much that athletes no longer felt that playing their sport was worth their effort" (p. 97). Gould and Whitley (2009) expanded on Coakley (1992) definition to be more precise that burnout is an all-encompassing overwhelming state:

> Burnout is a physical, emotional, and social withdrawal from a formerly enjoyable sport activity. This withdrawal is characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishments, and sport devaluation. Moreover, burnout occurs as a result of chronic stress (a perceived or actual imbalance between what is expected of an athlete physically, psychologically, and socially and his or her response capabilities) and motivational orientations and changes in the athlete (p.3).

Essential to burnout is the lack of control felt by the athlete, which can lead to excessive stress (Coakley, 1992). For early specializers, this feeling of burnout or lack of control can be felt due to a numerous amount of factors. In Gould, Tuffey, Udry, and Loehr (1996a, 1996b, 1997) quantitative and qualitative studies with junior tennis players, participants listed reasons for burnout due to physical, mental, and social demands. Examples of these demands were: high expectation from others such as peers, coaches, and parents that led to devaluation of the activity

and a fear of failure, lack of enjoyment, limited social relationships outside of tennis that led to learned helplessness, moodiness, low assertiveness, poor sleep, anger, perfectionism, boredom, and identity crises (Gould, et al., 1996a; 1996b; 1997).

The specialization process may also lead to burnout. Since specialization is a year round, intensive training regimen it can cause isolation for the athlete. Kjormo and Halvari (2002) found in their population of Olympic athletes that the participants felt role and relationship conflict, meaning the intensity of being an Olympic athlete caused challenges to developing and maintain friendships and family dynamics. This lack of free time due to their intense training and scheduling caused the athletes to have internal conflict over the worth of their specialization and the cost to their personal lives (Kjormo & Halvari, 2002). Sport specialization, especially early sport specialization can also restrict athletes from personal growth opportunities in other areas of their lives (Coakley, 2009). Due to the rigor of their scheduled lives, sport specialized athletes lack time to try other sports, have less time to focus on education, and lack development of other hobbies, relationships, and competence outside of sport (Coakley, 2009). Another component of burnout is the cost and sacrifice from the parents involved. Many young specialized athletes feel high expectations, pressure, and demands to perform at an elite level due to their parents' financial support and social sacrifices, this can cause stress and burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005a, 2005b; Harlick & McKenzie, 2000).

Sport specialization is not only linked to stress and burnout, but also to dropout. Dropout occurs when young athletes quit that particular sport situation; this can be due to the level of commitment, pressure, and lack of control specialization can bring. Sport specialization requires the athlete to complete highly organized and rigorous training programs and scheduling for not only their sporting participation, but also their life in general. Wall & Côté (2007) found support

for dropout due to specialization. In their study of parents whose children participated in minor ice hockey, the children that eventually dropped out of hockey had participated in off-ice training (i.e., running, cycling, weight training) at a younger age and devoted more hours to practice and game play than their active peers (Wall & Côté, 2007). This high level of involvement, organization, and focus on sport can cause athletes, especially young athletes, to resent the sport, lose an interest in participation, which eventually leads to dropout (Coakley, 1993; 2009).

Another cause for concern in early sport specialization is the possible increased rate of injury. According to Stanford Children's Health Research (2016) 3.5 million children under the age of 14 are injured annually playing sports, with 62% of those injuries occurring at practice. 775,000 of those 3.5 million (22%) children are treated in emergency rooms with the most common injuries: collisions, overexertion, falls, or being struck by a sport object (Stanford Children's Health Research, 2016). An even more alarming statistic is that emergency room visits for traumatic brain injuries among children under the age of 19 rose 62% from 2001 to 2009 (CDC, 2011). Research in sport specialization suggest that overuse injuries are more prevalent in early sport specializers due to their year round training, lack of recovery, and excessive stress on the muscles, ligaments, and joints (Baker, Cobley, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Bodey, Judge, & Hoover, 2013; Kaleth & Mikesky, 2010).

Lastly, sport specialization at a young age can cause issues with identity development. When athletes reach the investment years in their particular sport their self-esteem, self-worth, and competency can be linked to their sport and they no longer see themselves as having personal, autonomous traits, but instead see only their social traits associated with being an athlete as important (Côté, 1999; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991). Many athletes only develop relationships with their teammates, competitors, or other athletes that

endured similar experiences (specializers) because of their restrictive schedules. These restrictions that some athletes experience can greatly affect their ability to relate to others outside of sport and cause social harm in the future (Coakley, 2009; Shofner, & Shurts, 2004; Wiersma, 2000). Their plans and goals can revolve around their sport. Athletes with a high attachment to their sport can experience negative physical and mental consequences when it ends such as feeling out of control, sense of helplessness, mood swings, depression, anxiety, in some extreme cases thoughts of suicide, loss of appetite, changes to menstrual cycles, weight fluctuation, and insomnia (Blinde & Stratta, 1993; Lally, 2007, Pearson & Petitpas 1990). Research in the area of sport specialization as a detriment to young adult's health warns that parents and coaches should assess the risks before allowing their children to become early specializers and consider the sport sampling method as an alternative.

**The encouragement of specialization.** Many factors lead to parents' enrollment and encouragement of early sport specialization. First, literature exists explicitly advocating for starting specialized training at a young age. The *10-Year Rule*, *Power of Practice*, and the *Theory of Deliberate Practice* all stated that young athletes need extensive training to become elite athletes (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993; Newell & Rosenbloom, 1981; Simon & Chase, 1973). Simon and Chase (1973) constructed the *10-Year Rule* from their study of elite, class A, and beginner level chess players' perception and memory tasks in twenty different chess games. The researchers found that superior and more experienced chess players were able to organize and retain larger chunks of information or strategy than the novice players. Through their findings, Simon and Chase (1973) advocated that quantity and quality training allowed the advanced players to learn chess patterns, thus giving them more success. Through the study the authors created the *10-Year Rule* as a barometer for the length of time and the number of years

necessary to become an expert in chess. This logic has also been applied and observed in sport and specifically sport specialization.

Newell and Rosenbloom (1981) expanded from the Simon and Chase (1973) study to develop the *Power of Practice*. The *Power of Practice* principle explained that speed, accuracy, and increased performance are dependent on pre-existing knowledge that the individual has obtained through chunks of learning. In other words, there is a positive correlation between time spent practicing and higher achievement. Individuals must have higher repetitions and time spent practicing their skill in order to advance to the next level of achievement.

The most cited argument for sport specialization and specifically, early sport specialization is the *Theory of Deliberate Practice* created by Ericcson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer (1993). The *Theory of Deliberate Practice* explains that the number of repetitions is not enough; individuals must also commit to high quality, intent, and purpose with their practice (Ericcson, Krampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993). Specifically, Ericcson, Krampe and Tesch- Römer (1993) argue that talent is not the innate factor that differs between expert performers and novice, but it is a life-long period of deliberate and specific effort that makes them experts in their field. In the first part of their study, the researchers recruited 30 violinist participants from a intercollegiate setting and separated them into categories based on talent: 10 in "best", 10 in "good" and 10 in "music teachers" due to their music education background (Ericcson, Krampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993). Through surveys, interviews, and diary entries, the results yielded that all the participants felt solo practice (not in a group setting and without an instructor) was the most beneficial music activity and the "best" and "good" violinists practiced more often and for longer periods of time than the "music teacher" group (Ericcson, Krampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993). However, results demonstrated that the "best" and "good" violinists began extended hours

of practice per week earlier in their youth than the "music teachers" (Ericcson, Krampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993).

The second part of the study used 12 expert and 12 amateur pianists who completed a practice trial of key strokes, a week long diary entry on musical performance task, as well as a requirement to give three successful performances of a selected Bach prelude (Ericcson, Krampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993). The results found that expert pianists started on average four years before the amateurs in piano, acquired more hours of practice per week with deliberate effort on improving weaknesses, and steadily increased that practice into their adulthood (Ericcson, Krampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993). The results also showed that experts were able to complete the performances with less error, quicker strokes, and overall better fluidity than the amateurs (Ericcson, Krampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993). Through this work Ericcson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993) developed the idea that deliberate practice is needed to reach expert levels of performance. Their parameters included: that training was effortful, purposeful to address weaknesses, lacked inherent enjoyment, and started early in childhood to allow the child to surpass later age learners (Ericcson, Krampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993). The *Theory of Deliberate Practice, Power of Practice*, and the *10-Year Rule* have all been used to advocate for early specialization as a way to gain an advantage over other athletes and set specializers on a path for later success at an elite level.

Despite the literature that argues against sport specialization, many parents and coaches believe that organized private sports teams, private instruction, elite leagues or sports schools provide not only development of sports skill and physical fitness, but also a status among peers (Coakley, 2009). Sport specialization has provided a platform for commitment, motivation, and the building of self-efficacy. Stevenson (1999) found through his study of 29 international elite

athletes from Canada and England that two distinct factors allowed them to reach elite status in their particular sport: a process of introduction and involvement, and developing a higher level of commitment. The process of introduction and involvement entailed a period of time where the athletes sampled multiple sports and were given support from parents and coaches to discover their role, ability, and success in those sports (Stevenson, 1999).

Secondly, during the commitment phase, Stevenson (1999) found that athletes formed a personal connection and identity with one sport, as well as recognition from others as an athlete that led to a deeper commitment to training and playing in that particular sport. Specializers not only exhibited commitment, connection, and identity, they also demonstrated motivation and competency through their specialization experience. In a study of 200 college students who played youth sports, Russell (2014) found that specializers had a positive experience; they reported higher levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, sought out sport as a way to learn a skill, stay in shape, build personal competence, and had higher self-confidence than their non-specializer peers.

Not only do children develop self-worth through specialization, but also many parents enroll their children in early specialization due to their own personal status. Parents see their worth associated with their child's athletic success (Dukes & Coakley, 2002). This observation of their child's achievement and growth only solidifies the parent buy in or commitment to sport specialization; by providing their child elite training, equipment, and opportunity they are showcasing their love, belief, and sacrifice for their child (Dukes & Coakley, 2002). Visibility, technology, and elite athlete success stories are also a reason many parents, coaches, and athletes chose to specialize. Through the modern age of technology (i.e., smartphones, iPads, tablets, sport radio channels, abundance of sport channels and networks, etc.) sport is more accessible

and visible than ever before. Due to this visibility, sports have become part of our culture, conversation, and values (Coakley, 2009). Sport specialization is also now highly emphasized due to more visibility and emphasis from society. With success stories like Tiger Woods, Michael Phelps, Michelle Kwan, and the Williams sisters, parents feel that early specialization will help promote athletic success in the future (Gould, 2010; Smith, 2015). The media also promotes specialization by covering events like the Little League World Series, national and international rankings of youth players, and broadcasting the boom of private facilities and schools for sport (Gould, 2010). Due to all of these factors many parents, coaches, and young athletes make the decision to specialize to a single sport early in their childhood.

**Position specialization.** Sport specialization is typically defined as when an athlete commits to play, train, and compete year round exclusively in one sport (Baker, 2003; Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009; Baker, Cobley, &Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Coakley 2010; Grupe, 1985; Kaleth & Mikesky; 2010; Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick, & LaBalla, 2013; Malina, 2010; Torres; 2015; Wiersma, 2000). Previously, sport specialization was seen more exclusively as a trend for individual sport athletes. Early sport specialization for sports such as gymnastics, tennis, golf, and swimming was said to give athletes an advantage and set them on a track for Olympic or professional sport participation (Smith, 2010). Team sports (i.e., basketball, baseball, etc.) were deemed late specialization sports because they did not require specialization in childhood to obtain excellence in sport performances as an adult (Hill, 1993). However, the sport psychology literature reveals that sport specialization and early sport specialization is not restricted to individual sports; parents, coaches, and athletes are seeking out specialization even in team sports.

Despite the abundance of literature on what sport specialization is, there is very little reference to specialization in a sport position within a team environment (i.e., pitchers, quarterbacks, kickers, punters, goalies, etc.). While there are currently no definitions of position specialization, the definition that Coakley (2009) gives for sport specialization lays the groundwork for a possible understanding of this phenomenon. . Coakley (2009) defined sport specialization as, "Athletes dedicated exclusively to participation in a single event or position within an event. Excellence is defined in terms of specialized skills, rather than all-around physical abilities" (Coakley, 2009, p. 60).

Through this explanation it is understood that different sports require different skill sets; in that participation in a specific position in an event constitutes choosing that event over any others. However, this says nothing regarding the differences between the skill sets of positions in a specific sport. Whereas, sport specialization is defined as training skills sets exclusive to a particular event (sport), position specialization is dedication exclusively to participation in a single position within that event. Position specialization necessitates sport specialization, while the reverse is not true. An athlete that is a pitcher is necessarily, by the definition of that position, a baseball player, however, an athlete that is a baseball player is not necessarily a pitcher. Put another way, when an athlete decides to choose baseball over other sports that athlete is sport specializing, regardless of what position they play in that sport. When that same athlete choses to be a pitcher rather than a second baseman, they are position specializing. Here excellence would not just be defined in terms of sport specific skills, but rather position specific skills.

To further understand the concept of position specialization, literature from business and human resources was used. Job specialization is the concept of breaking down a task as simple as possible and creating jobs towards those certain segmented parts (Thibodaux, 2012). This

specialization allows the individual to build up expert level skill, knowledge, and task speed (Adeyoyin, Agbeze-Unazi, Oyewumni, & Ayolele, 2013; 2015). Job specialization requires the individual to give up other tasks and simply focus on the area in which they are the most proficient and skilled (Adeyoyin, Agbeze-Unazi, Oyewumni, & Ayolele, 2013; 2015). Through job specialization each individual's attitudes, thoughts, appearance, physiology, and psychology are considered and used to pair the individual with a task that best suits their abilities (Adeyoyin, Agbeze-Unazi, Oyewumni, & Ayolele, 2013; 2015).

Although job specialization has been explored from a business perspective, the components can be applied to a team sport environment. At the elite team sport level (intercollegiate and/or professional) athletes have sampled a variety of positions earlier in life and discovered their "job" on their team that best fits their personality and skill level. No longer is the emphasis on learning the game as a whole, but the specific components of their "job". As job specialization is described as small parts making up a productive whole, specialized position players make up key parts of the team in team sports. For example, just as a computer programmer is a specialized job within the information technology industry, being a pitcher is a specialized job within the sport of baseball or softball.

Due to a lack of firm definition of position specialization in the sport psychology literature, for the purpose of this study, the following definition taken from sport specialization literature and the works of Coakley (2009), Adeyoyin, Agbeze-Unazi, Oyewumni, & Ayolele, (2013, 2015) will be used. Position specialization occurs when an athlete has chosen not only one sport, but also one position within that sport. This athlete practices this one position year round through particular training that is based on purposeful, explicit skills, not general sport

specific ability. Through position specialization, an athlete becomes an individualized essential part that makes up the team whole.

**Sport specialization concepts applied to position specialization.** As it was noted previously sport specialization can provide benefits for athletes both physically and mentally. Several of the most cited reasons for sport specialization are the development of expertise through the *10 Year Rule, the Theory of Deliberate Practice,* and the stages of specialization (Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002; Ericcson, Kampe, & Tesch- Römer, 1993; Newell & Rosenbloom, 1981; Simon & Chase, 1973). These concepts could also be applied to help explain and define position specialization. Due to Simon and Chase's (1973) *10-Year Rule*, many other researchers began to focus on the differences between novices and experts in not only leisure activities, but also sport. Advocates of the *10-Year Rule* have found that those labeled as experts in sport specific skills have greater knowledge that is task-specific, they can interpret, store, and access information more efficiently than novice, and make decisions more quickly due to higher detection of patterns of play (Abernethy, 1987, 1990, 1991; Abernethy & Russell, 1984, 1987; Allard & Starkes, 1980; McPherson, 1993; McPherson & French, 1991; Simon & Chase, 1973; Singer & Janelle, 1999; Williams, 2000). These characteristics given to "experts" found in the research of the *10-Year Rule* can also be applied to position specialization. Athletes that specialize in a specific position generally have a higher level of knowledge compared to others about the position that they play. Position specialists are also able to interpret, store, and access information about their position and apply it in a game setting; this processing is done quickly due to their years of specialized training within their position.

Position specialists follow a very similar approach to practice as Ericcson, Kampe, & Tesch-Römer (1993) outlined in their *Theory of Deliberate Practice*. Their practice is

purposeful, detailed, and regimented (Ericcson, Kampe, Tesch-Römer, 1993). However, instead of focusing on improving weaknesses in the athlete's game as a whole, position specialists focus their attention and efforts on the mechanics, physical, and psychological skills necessary to improve their specific position or one area of the entire sport (i.e., pitching in softball; Ericcson, Kampe, Tesch- Römer (1993). These position specialists spent time during their adolescents increasing the amount of time in deliberate, focused practice of their position in order to elevate their chances of successes and perform at the elite level (Newell & Rosenbloom, 1981).

Not only can the *10-Year Rule* and the *Theory of Deliberate Practice* be used to explain position specialization, Côté's stages of sport specialization are also applicable. These stages can be broken down into the sampling years, specialized years, and the investment years (Bloom 1985; Côté, 1999; Kalinowski, 1985; Monsaas, 1985). In the sampling years, typically between the ages of 6-12, athletes sample a variety of sports and the emphasis is enjoyment and learning (Côté, 1999). In the specialized years, typically ages 13-15, the focus is narrowed to one or two sports where the athlete has seen success, status, and development of skill and talent (Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002). Finally, the investment years, beginning at age 16, the athlete pursues competition and practice for one sport exclusively.

It could be very possible and logical that position specialization would follow a very similar path to the stages of sport specialization. Similar to the sampling years outlined by Côté (1999), in position specialization the athlete plays multiple positions within a sport. Next, the athlete moves into a desire to narrow his or her focus to one or two positions. At this point, the athlete is starting to discover what positions in the particular sport he or she is more skilled at. For example, a baseball player beginning to uncover his throwing ability and begins to seek out pitching opportunities. As the athlete progresses further, he or she narrows in on one preferred

position; he or she begins to release other positions once played. Finally, once the athlete has narrowed to the one position, deliberate skill development in that one position takes place; they are position specialized.

**Unique factors influencing position specialization.** Since there is very little research on the idea of position specialization, it is currently unknown what unique factors influence and determine which athletes specialize in a position and which athletes do not and their reasoning behind this position specialization. The purpose of this study is to explore if the phenomenon of position specialization exists, reasons why athletes specialize in a position, and what is unique about their experience in terms of their training, coaching, and relationship to their team environment. In an attempt to explain possible unique factors associated with participating in a specialized position, preparation, isolation, athletic identity, and injury will be assessed in this section. These factors could explain how and why position specialization occurs.

First, it is important to note that preparation could be a possible factor that differs between position specialists and other positions on the field and or team. Jackson (1992, 1995) found in his study of elite figure skaters that peak performances were achieved when the mental preparation of the athletes was increased through detailed planning, physical conditioning, and the presence of positive thinking. In studies conducted on bowlers and golfers, Thomas and Over (1994) and Thomas, Schlinker, and Over (1996) discovered that athletes who experienced success had higher levels of preparation, concentration, commitment, technique, and competitiveness. Self-confidence also seems to be a component of peak performance despite pressure. Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett (2002) found in their study Olympic champions that the athletes had high levels of self-confidence in their abilities, high levels of hope, optimism, and productive perfectionism or their high personal standards for performance.

Although these studies did not target position specialists in a team sport, they could provide insight into a distinct difference between position specialists and their teammates. Position specialists' preparation is highly focused on their specific skill set to perform their position. Their planning, conditioning, training, and psychological skill development all revolves around the ability to complete their sole task associated with their position (i.e., a softball pitcher's bullpen routine, weight lifting, and running routine is very centered around what will prepare them best to pitch the most efficiently and effectively in a game). Comparatively, other position players on the team participate in training, conditioning, and psychological skills that are sport specific to their game; they do solely hone in on skills needed for one task, but a multitude of tasks. For example, a second baseman in softball has to train for the ability to field, hit, slide, run the bases, etc.

***Isolation.*** Another factor worth exploring with position specialist is the concept of isolation in sport. Research has demonstrated that student-athletes do feel levels of isolation from their peers due to being an athlete (Anderson, 2002, Hardin & Pate, 2013; Shofner & Schutz, 2004). Intercollegiate sports can cause restraint on time outside of sport and for many student-athletes their schedules greatly limit their time for developing relationships outside of their sport (Anderson, 2002). These student-athletes have added pressures of maintaining academic requirements to be eligible for competition and scholarship, practices, physical development, travel, and are restricted from social development available to their non-athlete peers (Hardin & Pate, 2013).

Many athletes only developed relationships with their teammates or other athletes that endured similar experiences. Meyer (1990) found through his study of 23 Division one female basketball and volleyball players that isolation was felt by the participants due to their social

groups being dominated by athletes, the lack of acceptance from their peers and professors, and being socially reinforced as an athlete before a student or individual. Reimer, Beal, and Schroeder (2000) found similar findings. Their study of 33 female basketball and tennis players revealed that social isolation was felt due to the athletes' living arrangements, lack of free time to explore other hobbies and friendships, and a lack of connection with peers, professors, or the university as a whole (Reimer, Beal, & Schroeder, 2000). Hyatt (2003) detailed that isolation occurred in her exploration of literature on male African American student-athletes due to minimized opportunity to engage in the campus community, encouragement from administrators and coaches to stay isolated within their team, and the negative stereotypes and attitudes towards student-athletes felt by their peers, professors, and staff. These restrictions that some student-athletes experience produced feelings of isolation, and greatly affected their identity development and could cause harm in the future (Shofner, & Shurts, 2004).

It is unclear if isolation is a factor that separates position specialists from other teammates in their sport. However, based on the outlined findings in the literature, isolation could potentially be more prevalent for position specialists. Compared to players that play other positions in their sport, position specialists could feel higher levels of isolation from their peers on the team due to their training being highly tasks specific. They could potentially have limited interaction with other players and coaches due to the development and training of their particular skill set. Since the concept of isolation has not been explored in position specialists thus far, this study will look to uncover if this component of the phenomenon exists.

***Confidence, mental toughness and resiliency***. Third, the psychological factors of confidence, mental toughness and resiliency could be attributed to the uniqueness and success of position specialists. Confidence is "the belief that one has the internal resources, particularly

abilities, to achieve success (Vealey, 2009, p. 43). Through the Sport-Confidence Model, confidence was found to have three main levels of influence (Vealey, & Chase, 2008; Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman, & Giacobbi, 1998). First, the personal factors and the organizational culture that the athlete is apart of can have effects on confidence. Then there are a multitude of sources of confidence such as: social support, leadership from coaches, mastery of physical abilities, and mental and physical preparation (Vealey, & Chase, 2008; Vealey, et al., 1998). These sources of confidence dictate the type of sport confidence employed such as: physical training, cognitive efficacy, or resiliency; all three of these levels affect one another and the behavior adopted in the performance by the athlete (Vealey, & Chase, 2008; Vealey, et al., 1998).

In application, this model demonstrates that confident athletes think they can complete their athletic tasks, practice until actions become automatic, and can restructure experiences when performances were poor (Williams, Zinsser, & Bunker, 2015).

Mental toughness is "an unshakeable belief that one can achieve his or her goals regardless of obstacles or setbacks" (Jones, Hanton, &Connaughton, 2007, p. 248). Particularly, mental toughness is broken down based on the four C's: control, commitment, challenge, and confidence (Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002). In order for an athlete to activate mental toughness he or she must feel some influence or control over the situation, a commitment to take an active role in the activity, seeing the chance to develop and grow instead of viewing the situation as a threat, and a strong belief in one's self (Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002). Jones, et al. (2002, 2007) interviews with elite Olympic and world champion athletes revealed that an unshakeable belief and the ability to focus on long-term goals as well as switch goals due to life factors accounted for the core of the concept mental toughness. More specifically, Jones et al. (2007)

examined mental toughness before, during, and after athletic performances in elite Olympic or world champion athletes. Specifically, the authors found that before performances athletes employed goal setting, during competition employed the ability to cope or rise above pressure, and after competition handle success or failure (Jones, et al., 2007).

In comparison to mental toughness, resiliency is defined as the ability to bounce back successfully after exposure to severe risk or distress, such as defeat, injury, and pressure. (Martinek & Hellison, 1997). However, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) offered the first definition of resiliency as it relates to elite sport performers, as "the role of mental processes and behavior in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors" (p. 675). Research has found that resiliency occurs during the timeframe when the athlete changes mental struggles and emotions into opportunities for growth, learning, and motivation to assist others (Galli & Vealey, 2008). The ability to create and maintain resiliency was explored by Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) in 12 former Olympic athletes. Expanding on Galli and Vealey (2008)'s study, it was Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) that found resiliency in sport is aided by employing coping, high motivation, a positive personality, confidence, focus, social support, and the ability to convert problems into challenges.

Bull, Shambrook, James and Brooks (2005) developed the mental toughness pyramid through their interviews with 12 cricket players demonstrating how the concepts of mental toughness, confidence, and resiliency are tied together. At the bottom of the pyramid is the environmental influence or the experiences that have provided opportunity for mental toughness in the past such as early play in the sport (Bull et al., 2005). The pyramid then moves up into tough character or the personal attributes that the athlete has developed such as confidence, independence, or resilience (Bull et al., 2005). The last factor is tough attitude or the unshakeable

belief in one's ability, the core to the definition of mental toughness (Bull et al., 2005). The pyramid demonstrates that all three important psychological concepts (mental toughness, confidence, and resiliency) are needed in order for an athlete to achieve athletic success, especially in spite of difficulty or barriers.

These three factors are not exclusively unique to position specialists, however the amount, levels, and past experience with these psychological factors could separate position specialists from their non-specialists peers. A position specialist could have been more exposed to failure, injury, defeat, and high pressure situations earlier and more often than their non-specialist peers. For example, a intercollegiate softball pitcher will have played through a game with high pressure, the spotlight, environmental distractions,  faced defeat, and felt success. Due to this exposure, the position specialist could have a more automatic sense of confidence, mental toughness or belief in his or her abilities, and experience with resiliency or persisting in spite of obstacles.

***Athletic Identity*.** Next, athletic identity is the last psychological factor that can be associated with the uniqueness of position specialists. Sports themselves are a unique subculture that promotes identity formation based on a shared interest, skill, or enjoyment. Donnelly and Young (1999) found through their exploration of rocker climbers and rugby players that sport plays a key role in identity formation based on four steps. They found that the four steps included that: sport allowed for the participants to gain a unique knowledge only shared by participants, formation of friendships or associations with those that participate in the particular sport, expectations of their chosen sport participants, and finally recognition and acceptance by others in the subculture of that sport as a member and fellow athlete (Donnelly & Young, 1999). Building off the findings of Donnelly and Young (1999), athletes that become position specialists could not only gain membership and status into their sport, but also potential

membership to a subculture of that sport based on their position. They become part of a small group of athletes on the team that perform a single skill which could place them in a subculture or subgroup within that sport and the recognition they receive surrounds their abilities could be geared solely towards performing that specific skill efficiently and effectively.

The four steps outlined by Donnelly and Young (1999), especially the final step where athletes become members and receive recognition as athletes, helps to foster a unique athletic identity. Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder (1993) defined athletic identity as ‘‘the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role’’ (p. 237). This athletic identity creation, development, and enhancement can be seen through the stages that athletes encounter through their development in sport. Athletes begin their careers with a small focus on athletics that grows into a much larger and more substantial emphasis on athletics and athletic success. As Côté (1999) outlined during the specialized and investment years of development, athletes begin to narrow their focus on one or two sports and transition to a more deliberate practice and play. Position specialists also narrow their focus in their adolescents or specialized and investment years. However, for these position specialists the narrowing of their attention and time is placed on their specific position/tasks within their sport. For example, for a soccer goalie deliberate practice and play is geared towards advancing the skills to defend a goal, compared to others on the team who are working on the skills needed to play the sport of soccer as a whole.

Erikson (1968) described the specialization and investment years as most susceptible to identity molding because athletes begin viewing sport as a more serious endeavor. During these stages there is also a shift in the way personal identity is seen by the athlete. Athletic identity can be so deeply rooted it can become the person’s sole or most important identity, or in other words, their identity is said to be “a product of internal consistencies and inconsistencies with one’s

past, differences and similarities one has with others, and plans and goals for the future" (Kleiber, Mannell, & Walker, 2011, p.219). The athlete now places their importance in their athletic development, as well as being seen as an "athlete," their self-esteem and self-worth is now tied to athletics. For this study, it is important to discover if position specialists have a tie to athletic identity based on being a position specialist.

Not only does athletics influence personal identity, it affects the athlete's social identity development as well. Social identity is defined as identity that is developed in a social context such as employment, family roles, religion, and ideologies all affect the ways in which identity is shaped (Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991). Athletes begin to drift away from other extracurricular activities and influences during the specialization and investment years and are essentially limiting social influences to those that are sport specific (Côté 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002). Social networks narrow to coaches, trainers, parents, and teammates causing social identity like personal identity, to be highly shaped by athletics. For position specialists this could potentially be even more regulated. This study looked to discover if position specialists' practice interactions are more narrowed compared to others on the team and if their type of practice influences their ability to create relationships with teammates and coaches at a different level compared to their non-position specialists' peers.

***Injury.*** Lastly, a unique factor to position specialists could be the occurrence and types of injury. Particularly, for the sports of baseball and softball, there is evidence to show that position specialists (pitchers) experience higher rates of arm injury than other positions on the team. For example, Shanley, Rauh, Michener, and Ellenbecker (2011) found in their study of 247 high school players that injury rates for pitchers was 37.3% while other positions players the rate was only 15.3%. They also found that out of these injuries, 63.3% were related to the upper

extremities, which are highly used and worn down over time in softball and pitching motions (Shanley et al., 2011). Similarly, Smith et al. (2015) found in their study of 98 softball players between the ages of 9-18 that 61% of the 49 injuries reported were from pitchers. Out of the 30 pitcher injuries, 18 occurred while pitching in some capacity and 11 of the injuries were to the shoulder (Smith, et al., 2015). The likelihood of shoulder injuries and more injuries in quantity with pitchers than other position players was also found in a study by Krajnik, Fogarty, Yard, and Comstock (2010). They found out of the 91 baseball and softball shoulder injuries reported by high school athletic trainers for the years 2005-2008 through the High School Reporting Injury Information Database, injuries sustained on the mound were more likely than any other position on the field and that injured baseball players were two times more likely to be pitchers (Krajnik, et al., 2010).

The statistics are not just higher for pitchers than other position players at the amateur level, but also the professional level. In a study completed from 2002-2008 from the American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine (2010), MLB pitchers were 34% more likely to be injured than their fielding peers (specifically arm and shoulder injuries) and 77% of these injuries occurred early in the season before the All-Star Break. These higher rates of pitcher injuries have also lead to a higher rate of Tommy John surgery or the repair of the ulnar collateral ligament (UCL). According to the MLB (2016), during the 2012-2013 season 25% of major league pitchers and 15% of minor league pitchers reported having Tommy John surgery at some point in their career. Since 2013, the rate of pitchers receiving the surgery has increased from 15-20 players a year to 25-30 (MLB, 2016).

Due to these statistics, injury could be one of the most unique factors that effects position specialists. These statistics could point to the underlying issue that deliberate practice and

position specialization early in childhood or adolescence could potentially cause greater risk for injury in the future. Further exploration of injury, injury rates, and position specialization needs to occur in order to provide the best care physically and mentally for youth, intercollegiate, and professional athlete.

## Organizational and Team Culture

Second, espoused beliefs and values explained when a founder or leader's views are adopted and shared by a group; these views, goals, and aspirations become solidified into an accepted ideology or philosophy that is used to guide the organization through positive and negative events (Schein, 2010). Lastly, basic assumptions of organizational culture are defined as the unconscious, taken for granted thoughts and actions resulted from repeated success and stability (Schein, 2010). These assumptions are sometimes invisible categories that have developed over a long period of time and can be hard to change (Schein, 2010).

**Organizational culture in a sport setting.** Like business entities, sport organizations also prosper or fail due to organizational culture. Sports organizational culture is unique to the sport context. The shared values and meanings all surround sport; ceremonies, stories, myths, symbols, specialized sport language are all factors that contribute to an exclusive sport culture (Slack & Parent, 2006). For sport organizations, stories and myths, symbols, language, and ceremonies and rites are used to explain and reinforce culture. Stories and myths provide a sense of history or anchor in the past for sport organizations (Slack & Parent, 2006). These stories and myths assist in preserving an enduring entity and provide a foundation that reduces uncertainty for employees (Slack & Parent, 2006).

Symbols, logos, or colors are also contributing features to creating organizational culture in sport. Symbols convey to members and the public at large the meaning and goals of an

organization (Slack & Parent, 2006). For example, Nike's "swoosh" is one of the most iconic sport symbols; the elongated check mark is associated with speed, athleticism, victory, and prestige (Slack & Parent, 2006). Language, ceremonies, and rites are distinctive in sport organizations. Language is specifically sport and job oriented; it could be from the plays the coach calls, to the abbreviation of terms in the NCAA compliance office on college campuses (Slack & Parent, 2006). Ceremonies and rites are used to initiate, motivate, and sustain employees by providing a social identity to an organization and its mission; such as, award nights, pep rallies, ring ceremonies, etc. (Slack & Parent, 2006). Just as shared values, beliefs, and assumptions are essential to business organizations, these shared components also applicable and needed in sport organizations to create and maintain an effective culture.

**Beneficial organizational culture.** Organizations that emphasize and encourage a shared organizational culture can see many positive benefits. Wiley (1996) found in analysis of existing quantitative and qualitative studies about organizational culture, that the more present organizational culture, policies, and leadership were, the more productive, energized, and committed employees were to the long-term goals of the organization. One correlation that has been well documented in the literature, that has shown more productive and committed employees, is the link between organizational culture and job satisfaction. Tsai (2011) conducted a survey on 200 hospital employees and found that organizational culture was positively correlated with leadership behavior and job satisfaction. The study also reflected a positive correlation between leadership behavior and overall employee job satisfaction (Tsai, 2011). Lund (2003) uncovered in a survey of 360 marketing professionals that the type of organizational culture positively or negatively correlated with job satisfaction. Lund (2003) discovered a positive correlation between job satisfaction, clan, and adhocracy (cultures that promote

innovation, flexibility, and spontaneity) and a negative correlation between job satisfaction, market, and hierarchy cultures (cultures that promote formalization, structure, and production oriented). All of these studies demonstrated that employees felt more commitment and happiness in their workplace when the culture is employee driven.

Building off the importance of a positive organizational culture, Argyris and Smith (2014) outlined that there are distinct features (feedback, commitment, flexibility, reward, encouragement, and trust) to an effective and productive organization culture. Successful organizations promoted a culture that accepted and sought feedback from all the employees, not just management (Argyris & Smith, 2014). Commitments to change and learning, flexibility in development of policies, encouragement of all employees involved were also highlighted as keys to a dynamic organization. Finally, Argyris and Smith (2014) argued to avoid counterproductive organization culture, the idea that employees that are rewarded for their new ideas and risks demonstrated more focus, cooperation, and trust in the organization as a whole.

For example, Google is known for having a unique, but highly successful organizational culture. At Google they encourage creativity and loyalty through their core value of the 70/30/10 rule (Thompson, 2016). The rule explains that 70% of their work day needs to be made up of their given job tasks, 30% towards new ideas related to their core tasks, and 10% of time given to new ideas regardless of their specific category (Thompson, 2016). Google increases loyalty by offering employee driven services such as: massages, free chefs, nap pods, and recreational breaks throughout the day (Thompson, 2016). The Arizona Diamondbacks (a Major League of Baseball organization) are another organization that has been noted for their exceptional organizational culture (Belzer, 2015). The Diamonbacks' organization promotes transparency and collaboration; they currently hold an employee of the month honor that receives attention

and accolades, but also that employee joins the president's council and is encouraged to speak up and contribute to the problem solving strategy of the organization at large (Belzer, 2015). Both of these examples demonstrate services and policies that allow employees to feel challenged, rewarded, and encouraged in their job, which creates a culture of employees willing to strive for long-term success for the organization.

**Detrimental organizational culture.** Not all organization culture is positive; many times organizational culture can be toxic and cause job dissatisfaction and turnover (Willard-Grace et al., 2015). In a study of primary care givers and nurses, Willard-Grace et al. (2015) found a correlation between low levels of management influence and team culture and high levels of frustration and burnout from the participants. In contrast, high management and team culture influence allowed for lower levels of cynicism and higher perceptions of ability from participants (Willard-Grace et al., 2015). Culture and the perception of care for employees are essential to proper management. As it is expressed in the article from Willard-Grace et al. (2015), many times toxic organizational culture is due to inadequate or levels of isolation from management. Anthony (1994) identified the inadequate leadership and isolation from management as a lack of collaborative decision-making, their power and position separates them from others, and lack of authentic guidance and direction.

Another factor to poor organizational culture is workplace bullying. Workplace bullying, mobbing, or victimization is characterized as negative communication that occurs often and over a long period of time that is directed at an individual or group of individuals (Inceoglu, 2002). Workplace bullying is typically found when there are repeated and systematic accounts of social aggression in the workplace (Inceoglu, 2002). Many factors can contribute to a hostile organizational culture such as: the work environment, communication styles, climate, and

leadership styles (Vartia, 1996; 2000; 2001; 2002). Vartia (1996; 2001; 2002) studied 949 Finnish Federal municipal employees and asked the participants about whether they themselves had experienced or witnessed workplace bullying. The results of the studies found that the atmosphere was strained and competitive, there was a presence of poor flow of communication about tasks and goals, and tense social climates were found to contribute to workplace bullying (Vartia, 1996; 2001; 2002).

Furthermore, the participants in Vartia (1996; 2001; 2002) studies that indicated that they had experienced bullying had lower levels of self-confidence and higher levels of mental and general stress. Additionally, the participants that observed bullying felt repercussions from the bullying like a lack of ability to report, causing problems for the organization as a whole (Vartia, 1996; 2001; 2002). Inceoglu (2002) found similar findings to Vartia (1996; 2001; 2002) in a study of ten German banks within a two-year time frame. Out of the 240 participants, 15 people (6.4%) self-reported bullying and 36 people (16.6%) observed bullying in their workplace (Inceoglu, 2002). These bullied participants reported lower levels of effectiveness and performance, safety orientation, leadership influence, and team culture than non-bullied participants (Inceoglu, 2002).

Corrupt organizational culture is also a source of poor or toxic work environments (Campbell & Göritz, 2014). In corrupt organizations, employees immerse themselves in their own personal or small group endeavors and productive teamwork is jeopardized (Pinto, Leana, & Fil, 2008). In these corrupt cultures, employees are taught and facilitate illegal activities that give themselves and their company monetary and power advantages (Palmer and Maher 2006; Pinto et al. 2008). For example, Campbell and Göritz (2014) discovered in their qualitative study of 14 experts who had worked in corrupt international organizations that the organizations sponsored

feelings of war (or hate towards other companies), success and security were more important than ethic, a lack of moral judgement, and punishment was more prevalent than reward.

This sense of corrupt organizational culture is not foreign to the world of sports, especially intercollegiate sports. For example, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was found by an investigation from the NCAA to have committed 18 counts of academic fraud (Ganim & Sayers, 2014). The investigation found that fake classes, papers, and grades were given to athletes, particularly male football and basketball players, which resulted in the firing of five employees and sanctions from the NCAA (Ganim & Sayers, 2014). This demonstrated a culture that sponsored cheating, fraud, and corruption academically and athletically in the name of advancement over other universities for sport prestige. All of these examples demonstrate that employee driven and ethical types of organizational culture are essential to avoid job dissatisfaction, turnover, and legal consequences.

**Organizational climate.** Organizational culture can also be compared to as organizational climate. Climate is very different than culture; it is grounded in a psychological evaluation of an organization (Inceoglu, 2002; Reichers & Schneider, 1990). The use of the word climate, instead of culture, emphasizes that the organization can be removed from human intervention, managed, and measured in a scientific way (Mcauley, Duberley, & Johnson, 2014). Organizational climate's importance is the ability to measure or quantify the internal and external environments of a workplace, compared to culture's concern to understand individual and group values, assumptions, and beliefs (Ashkansay, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000). In other words, the difference between culture and climate is the contextual situation in a point in time. Many times organizations use surveys or questionnaires with scales to assess the climate of how deeply individuals engage in their organization (Ashkansay, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000).

For example, Cooke and Lafferty (1989) constructed the Organizational Culture Inventory that had 12 different scales and 10 items in each scale all focused on analysing an organization's employee engagement, employee fit, comprehension of expectations and values, as well as behavioral norms. This scale and the evaluation of climate are essential to acquiring knowledge of the organization's ability to solve problems, adapt, grow, and perform effectively and efficiently. West, Smith, Feng, and Lawhorn (1998) examined the relationship between research excellence ratings and the departmental climates in British universities. In this study they found that organizational units that ranked the highest in research excellence had a positive climate and team cohesiveness through the high achieving, motivated, and high performing nature of the employees involved in that unit (West, Smith, Feng, & Lawhorn, 1998).

Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee (2005) used 154 surveys from thirty Korean technology companies to assess the link between organizational climate and knowledge sharing (fairness, innovation, and affiliation). They found that organizations that had high levels of positive organizational climate sponsored subjective norms of knowledge sharing from their employees and management (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005). Both of these studies reflect the importance of organizations identifying group and individual motivations, company subjective norms, and organizational climate. It is crucial for sport and business organizations alike to understand their external and internal environments and the affects they have on their organization's culture and achievement.

**Sport organizational culture research.** Just as organizational culture is a crucial component of business organizations' management and human resources, it is also an influential factor in the successes and/or failures of sport organizations. Although research in the areas of sport organizational culture is small, it has gained momentum since the turn of the millennium

(Girginov, 2006; Kaiser, Engel, & Keiner, 2009; Schroeder, 2010a). According to Maitland, Hills, and Rhind (2015) there are roughly 33 studies (1995-2015) in circulation that cover organizational sport culture from a sport management perspective.

First, research in the area of sport organizational culture explored organizational components, effectiveness, and productivity. Studies found that a strong and established organizational culture provided an opportunity for high organizational performance (Choi, Martin, & Park, 2008; Choi & Scott, 2008; 2009; Colyer, 2000; Kent & Weese, 2000). Organizational effectiveness has been explored from the perceptions of stakeholders in relation to athletic program performance, the priorities of the athletic department, and the values of the athletic departments (Cunningham, 2002; Trail & Chellandurai, 2002; Wolfe, Hoeber, & Babiak, 2002; Wolfe and Putler, 2002).

For example, Cunningham (2002) studied the internal environment by examining the nature of effectiveness in Division I athletic departments in the areas of athletic achievement, student-athlete graduation rates, and Title IX compliance. He discovered through his survey of 172 Division I athletic directors, that the majority of athletic departments that took prospector or a new market idea approach had more athletic success, whereas the defenders or conservative athletic departments had higher graduation rates and compliance with Title IX (Cunningham, 2002). Trail and Chelladurai (2000) also investigated stakeholders, but focused on external stakeholders. The researchers surveyed 241 faculty members and 311 students from a Midwestern university about their university's athletic department to understand if creating gender equality, performance goals, developmental goals, media relations, and selecting and retaining coaches, and winning were priorities of the stakeholders. The researchers found that the faculty population placed the importance of the athletic department's goals in the category of

academic achievement, whereas the students emphasized the athletic performance goals such as winning and prestige (Trail & Chelladurai, 2000). These studies were important because it demonstrated the importance of stakeholders' perceptions and values aligning with the organization's culture and emphasis at the university.

Organizational change has also been explored in the area of organizational culture. Choi and Scott (2008) found a link between the manipulation of organizational culture and effectiveness in American Triple-A baseball teams. In another study, Choi and Scott (2008) discovered in seven Korean professional baseball teams that organizational culture influenced job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was also positively linked to organizational culture in a study completed by MacIntosh and Walker (2012). They found in their surveys of 438 fitness center employees in Canada that the key values or organizational culture influenced the job satisfaction and longevity with the company of their employees. Fontiera (2010) used a qualitative approach to explore organizational change. Through interviews with six professional sport (three NFL, two NBA, one MLB) team general managers that had brought their organization through a culture change, it was found that organizational culture changed for the mangers' when they instituted explicitly open formal and informal communication, new vision, and created a climate centered on winning/improved performance.

Third, research explored organizational culture in relation to symbols, artifacts, values, and assumptions. Parent and Smith-Swan (2012) found that the Olympic games culture has and continues to be associated with protocol, tradition, and ceremony. Parent and MacIntosh (2013) explored if temporary settings played a role in Olympic organizational culture. They discovered that due to the limited time frame of a temporary setting, crystallization of organizational culture occurred, Olympic values and beliefs were adapted quickly, and a fostering of relationships with

other team members occurred at a more rapid pace. Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, and Christensen (2013) discovered in their study of developmental soccer athletes that the strong philosophy of a family atmosphere, emphasis on academics, and importance of hard work allowed for commitment from players and parents as well as long-term soccer development.

Finally, Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler (2010a; 2010b; 2011) focused on creating an organizational environment that allowed athletes to develop and prosper. Through their research they discovered that for athletes to be successful in their sport, athletic talent development environments needed to include: role models, support of goals (long-term focused), opportunities for inclusion in the training environment, external factors tied to their environment such as school and family, and a clear organizational culture (Henriksen, 2015; Henriksen, Larsen, & Christensen, 2014).

All of this research demonstrates that sport organizations, administrators, coaches, and athletes are a unique, yet promising population for exploring organizational culture. However, despite the growing literature on sport organizational culture in sport management and sport psychology contexts, there is a lack of research that is aimed to discover organizational culture on a micro level or team level. Further research is needed to explore the influence of team culture on individual and athletic team dynamics, learning, and performances.

**Team culture and its contributing factors.** Although organizational culture has been explored with professional, Olympic, and intercollegiate sport in the sport management and sport psychology literature, it has been analysed from a macro, formal, or overarching organizational lens. It is important to also explore organizational or team culture within the micro, informal level. The informal, micro level of sport organizations, specifically teams, determines the overall ability for goal achievement, high performance, and productivity. When exploring the micro

culture of intercollegiate athletics, the focus should narrow on the team, team culture, and the factors that influence team culture. Team culture has only been vaguely explained in the sport literature as the team's social and psychological environment (Schroeder, 2010b). This lack of clarity causes team culture to be explored currently as a subset of organizational culture or "the values, beliefs, and assumptions about appropriate behavior that members of an organization share" (Lussier & Hendon, 2016).

***Group and role assignment.*** To understand team culture, an individual must first understand the definition of a team. Carron, Hausenblas, and Eys (2005) defined a team as:

> A collection of two or more individuals who possess a common identity, have common goals and objectives, share a common fate, exhibit structured patterns of interaction and modes of communication, hold common perceptions about group structure, are personally and instrumentally interdependent, reciprocate interpersonal attraction, and consider themselves to be a group (p. 13).

A team is also outlined by their shared mutual benefit from their involvement with one another and the influential nature of their relationship (Horn, 2008). Furthermore, an athletic team experiences success and failure of the group's goals as a whole unit (Carron & Brawley, 2008; Eys, Burke, Carron, & Dennis, 2010). To solidify the group further, positions are fixed, leadership roles emerge, and the athletes begin to self-categorize themselves as members (Eys, Burke, Carron, & Dennis, 2010).

An important distinction in the parts of a team or group is the idea of group roles. In a group or a team there are formal and informal roles. Formal roles are dictated by the leader (i.e., coach or team captain) and these roles are considered concrete and part of the organizational structure (Eys, Burke, Carron, & Dennis, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). The informal roles on

the team evolve from group processing, collaboration, and dynamics (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). To truly understand the moving parts of a team, an individual must comprehend their role, or have obtained role clarity (Carron, Eys, & Burke, 2007; Eys, Burke, Carron, & Dennis, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). Then this individual must move to the stage of role acceptance; success of the team depends on each individual's acceptance and role contribution (Carron, Eys, & Burke, 2007; Eys, Burke, Carron, & Dennis, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). For example, Chow and Feltz (2007) noted that when players had a greater sense of their role, it contributed to a heightened sense of confidence in the team's ability.

However, sometimes role ambiguity occurs when the clarity or acceptance of a role is not present. Role ambiguity is explained as when an individual has feelings of uncertainty and indecisiveness about what their role is in a group or team (Carron, Eys, & Burke, 2007; Eys, Burke, Carron, & Dennis, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). When role ambiguity occurs it can lead to role conflict. Bray, Beauchamp, Eys, and Carron (2005) found when an athlete is high on the scale in need of role clarity, ambiguity occurred and the athlete's overall role satisfaction or how happy they are on the team decreased. Both group dynamics and role assignment should be explored further as potential contributing factors in team culture.

***Team leadership.*** Leadership is also a contributing factor to the formula of a successful team culture and team. Leadership is defined as "the process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northhouse, 2001, p. 3). Typically, the individual that rises to be a leader in a group possesses the ability to motivate, high connectivity, relatable to others, and can guide others towards certain tasks or goals (Murray, Mann, & Mead, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2010). In the environment of intercollegiate athletics, specifically a

team, the coaching staff is the main leader of the team or the group. The coach is responsible for the physical, emotional, and competitive state of their athletes.

The coach's leadership capabilities and the coach-athlete relationship are driving components behind either a positive or negative team culture. Lafrenière, Jowett,Vallerand, Donahue, and Lorimer (2008) uncovered that harmonious passion or engaging in the activity freely was positively associated with the formation and success coach-athlete relationship. Hampson and Jowett (2014) revealed in their study of 150 British football players that the perceptions of the coach's leadership, and the coach-athlete relationship were direct predictors for overall team efficacy. In other words, the more players felt their coach was a collaborative member of their group, the more positive the coach-athlete relationship was expressed then the higher overall percentage of team efficacy. In another study, Jowett and Cockerill (2003) found that in their interviews with 12 former Olympic medallists the presence of a positive coach-athlete relationship was associated with feelings of closeness, trust, respect, and common goals.

Whereas, the negative coach-athlete relationship was associated with lack of emotional closeness and a lack of resources needed (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Davis and Jowett (2014) echoed the importance of a positive coach-athlete relationship in their study of 192 intercollegiate, club, national, and international athletes. They discovered that athletes that felt a secure attachment to their coach indicated feelings of social support, high levels of interdependence, and relationship depth (Davis & Jowett, 2014). These studies demonstrate that the qualities of coach leadership and the formation and growth of a progressive coach-athlete relationship can lead to a high achieving and affirmative team culture, efficacy, and goals.

***Team cohesion*.** Team cohesion by definition is the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives (Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer,

1998; Tekleab, Karaca, Quigley, & Tsang, 2016, p. 3501; Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009). There are two main types of cohesion: task and social. Task cohesion explains the amount that group members work together to achieve a common goal, whereas, social cohesion describes the degree in which members enjoy each other's company (Spink & Carron, 1992; Weisburg & Gould, 2010). Personal, environmental, leadership, and team factors all influence team cohesion (Weinberg & Gould, 2010). Cohesion can also be influenced by the level of competition, size of the team, type of sport, gender, and individual and leadership perceptions (Carron, Eys, & Burke, 2005). However, despite these factors, team cohesion has been shown to positively affect performance, team satisfaction, social support, and team stability (Boyd, Kim, Ensari, & Yin, 2014; Carron, Bray, & Eys, 2002; Calvo et al., 2014; Marcos, Miguel, Oliva, & Calvo, 2010; Martin & Good, 2015; Turman, 2003).

Turman (2003) identified through his case study analysis of 30 athletes, positive team cohesion and team satisfaction were promoted through the use of motivational speeches, team prayer, and team dedication. He also found that inequity of playing time and or attention, embarrassment from a coach or teammate, and ridicule deterred overall team cohesion (Turman, 2003). Boyd, Kim, Ensari, and Yin (2014) found a relationship between team cohesion and motivation in their study of 179 male intercollegiate basketball and soccer players. The researchers discovered that positive task and social cohesion (working towards a common goal and enjoyment of interaction) correlated with higher levels of motivation and ego-centered cohesion had a negative effect on motivation.

Martin and Good (2015) analyzed the difference of gender and team cohesion and exposed that all-female teams have higher rates of team cohesion and social support. Marcos, Miguel, Oliva, & Calvo (2010) found positive team cohesion correlated with higher levels of

self-efficacy among their 76 professional soccer and basketball athletes. All of these studies demonstrated the affect of team cohesion and the positive factors associated with team culture. Further studies should examine team cohesion specifically with the experiences, thoughts, and beliefs of athletes in their team culture.

***Team learning***. The last contributing factor to team culture are the ideas of organizational and team learning.Giesecke and McNeil (2004) described a learning organization as:

> A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights. Without accompanying changes in the way that work gets done, only the potential for improvement exists. Learning organizations translate new knowledge into new ways of behaving. In a learning organization, managers and staff encourage work-related learning, the exchange of information between employees to create new ideas and knowledge, and continuous improvement (p. 55).

Organizational learning allows individuals to work as a group and openly make mistakes, take risks, and study their job tasks. Organizational learning has been shown to result in positive and long-term growth and production in businesses (Adler, 1990; Ingram & Simons, 2002). Lim (2010) completed a survey of 669 Korean employees in a Korean private company and found that there was a positive correlation between an organizational learning culture and job satisfaction, and continued commitment to the company and its goals.

Although organizational learning has not been explored in depth in a sport context, Xie (2005) used as survey sent out to State Sport General Administration of China employees to discover a correlation between organizational learning, job satisfaction, internal service quality,

and organizational commitment. The results of the 298 responses found that motivation to learn and organizational culture were positively associated with internal service quality and there was also a positive correlation between organizational culture and job satisfaction (Xie, 2005). In other words, employees felt their organization fostered their learning and in return they had high levels of enjoyment in their job.

Little research has been done to demonstrate the link between team learning and intercollegiate sports teams. Due to the constantly changing environment of intercollegiate athletics (coaching changes, players entering, leaving, and graduating, management shifts, etc.) team learning is a key factor in the birth, evolution, and a sustained team culture. Ellis, et al. (2003) defined team learning as "a relatively permanent change in the team's collective level of knowledge and skill produced by the shared experience of the team members" (p. 822). However, based off Senge's (2010) five disciplines of organizational learning, the concepts could be applied to research the area of team learning in an intercollegiate sport team environment. An intercollegiate athletic team uses all five of Senge's (2010) major parts of organizational learning: (a) personal mastery, (b) mental models, (c) shared vision, (d) team learning, and (e) systems thinking.

First, personal mastery explained one's own path to skill proficiency or the effort and work an individual places in their position/role before and during their intercollegiate athletic career (Senge, 2010). Second, the mental models are what drive the cognitive processes and understanding; specifically, in athletics this is sponsored by the coaching staff's teachings (Senge, 2010). Third, when a team has members who understand their role and are committed to the overall goal(s) they have achieved shared vision. Fourth, Senge (2010) described team learning as the production of extraordinary results and growth that would not have occurred

outside of a team atmosphere. Finally, system thinking is described as how individuals see the world around them and the focus on thinking as a system or group (Senge, 2010). Organizational or team learning in an intercollegiate sport setting is essentially, "individuals learn first as individuals, but as they join together in organizational change, they learn as clusters, teams, networks, and increasingly larger units" (Watkins & Marsick, 1996, p. 4).

Based on Senge's (2010) principles future research should address the subject of team learning and its influence on team culture. It is important to understand how groups or teams learn, interact, and develop. Team culture research should look to target how group or coach leadership, role assignment, team cohesion, and team learning shape intercollegiate team culture. Through this exploration of team culture, more research could highlight the different roles on intercollegiate athletic teams and how each position is either accepted or isolated within that specific team culture.

## Coach-Athlete Relationship

**Coach-athlete relationship defined.** Just as it is important to understand team culture and cohesion and their affect on the athlete, it is also crucial to grasps the development and evolution of the coach-athlete relationship. First, the coach-athlete relationship must be established. According to Jowett and Poczwardowski (2007) the coach-athlete relationship refers to when the coach and the athlete's feelings, thoughts, and beliefs are shared and interrelated. This relationship is best illustrated as a dynamic state, constantly evolving, and changing over time (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). This shared relationship can be successful, caring, and helpful or interdependent (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). Interdependence is a connection between members on a certain platform. In the case of sport or the coach-athlete relationship, the interdependence allows for role, duty, and responsibility understanding (Jowett, 2005). The

coach and the athlete are connected in terms of commitment to maximize the relationship, closeness or mutual trust and respect, and complementarity or corresponding verbal and non-verbal behaviors (Jowett, 2005).

Many factors influence the coach-athlete relationship based on different levels of play. At the intercollegiate and professional levels, in order for the coach-athlete relationship to grow, stabilize and remain harmonious, both the athlete and the coach must achieve athletic and professional excellence (Jowett, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002). At the intercollegiate and professional levels of sport the goal combination of success and effectiveness become the ideal. In this case, the athlete is exceeding goals and he or she is gaining a sense of growth through maturity and satisfaction (Jowett, 2005). In youth sport coach-athlete relationships, striving for excellence is not necessarily present. Instead, the distinction of the relationship is built on skill acquisition, confidence, personal growth or improvement (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007).

However, all levels of play can encounter the issues of interdependence, ineffectiveness, or unsuccessful relationships. These coach-athlete relationships can be detrimental to both individuals involved. The cost in disappointment and frustration outweigh the rewards (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). The relationship can also be compromised if the athlete becomes over dependent on the coach and the relationship is no longer functional or a flow of give and take (Jowett, 2005). Ultimately, coach-athlete relationships are sensitive, time bound, and fragile; successful and effective relationships can lead to goal achievement, whereas, ineffective relationships can cause power differentials and dissatisfaction.

**Coaching leadership styles and the coach-athlete relationship**. Since coaches can have a tremendous impact on the both the athletic and personal growth of athletes, it is important to research and understand coaching styles and behavior in order to obtain coaching effectiveness.

Chelladurai (2007) constructed a multi-dimensional model of leadership to provide insight into coaching effectiveness. He identified that leadership style preference by the athletes' involved, actual behavior exhibited by the leader, and type of behavior appropriate to the situational context all influenced perceived coaching effectiveness (Chelladurai, 2007). For example, different age groups, levels, or psychological factors all influence the type of coaching style needed by each athlete, coaching behavior directly relates to coaching experience, philosophy, and training, and different levels or organizations can provide different situations that require different coaching behavior or style (Chelladurai, 2007; Horn, 2008). Based on Chelladurai's (2007) model of coaching effectiveness, many scales and types of leadership have been identified in the sport psychology literature (Horn, 2008). These styles of leadership range from positive (authentic, democratic, instructional, positive feedback, supportive, participative, and transformational) and negative (ego-centered, controlling, negative activation, and laissez-faire; Horn, 2008).

Coaching styles are highly influential in the perception, effectiveness, and success of the coach, team, and the coach-athlete relationship. In the sport setting, coaching styles vary depending on the sport, age, level of play, and goals of the organization. Coaches do not necessarily have to fit into a certain style, in actuality they can move through various coaching styles depending on the situation at hand. However, these coaching styles are highly significant in the coach-athlete relationship; athletes look to their leaders or coaches for support, instruction, and guidance both in and outside their sport context.

Over the past decade, one of the leadership styles to emerge from the positive psychology movement is authentic leadership (Murray, Mann, & Mead, 2010). Authentic leadership is founded on the idea that an individual knows and operates as his or her true self in his or her

everyday life (Kernis, 2003). Authentic leaders have positive and productive coach-athlete relationships due to their foundational principles of openness, trust, and transparency (Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005). Another beneficial coaching leadership style is transformational. In this leadership style, the focus is on how a leader can help others move from their current selves to possible selves (Murray, Mann, & Mead, 2010). In this approach the coach's vision is shared and accepted among the team, collaboration is encouraged, and self-interest diminishes for the good of the team or group (Murray, Mann, & Mead, 2010). For the athlete, this leadership style provides a platform for feedback, consideration, and decision-making. Furthermore, the authentic and transformational leadership styles can affect the motivation of the athlete in the coach-athlete relationship. According to Mageau and Vallerand (2003) when coaches exhibit support and give autonomy to the athletes the athletes can have higher levels of intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivations.

In comparison to positive leadership styles, one of the most prominent and ineffective leadership styles is the authoritarian leader. In this style the coach can be viewed as highly manipulative, rigid, holds prejudices, and believes in severe punishment to achieve goals (Murray, Mann, & Mead, 2010). This style of coaching could strain, damage or even destroy the coach-athlete relationship; the athlete could be left feeling used, battered, or ignored. Another example of ineffective coaching leadership is the laissez-faire approach. In this leadership style, the coach takes a hands off approach. There is a lack of decision-making, responsibility, and direction (Horn, 2008). This style could also cause issues in the coach-athlete relationship by providing the athlete with role confusion and frustration.

**Positive and negative leadership behavior and its affect on athletes.** The coach's leadership capabilities and behaviors are driving components behind the coach-athlete

relationship and perceived coaching effectiveness. These behaviors can be categorized into two categories: the positive and negative approach (Smith, 2010; Smith & Smoll, 2001). The positive approach focuses on the use of encouragement, praise, and instruction to motivate players into the outcome the coach desires (Smith, 2010; Smith & Smoll, 2001). The negative approach uses punishment as a tool to eliminate unwanted behaviour and the main motivating factor in the negative approach is fear (Smith, 2010; Smith & Smoll, 2001).

In the positive approach, coaches use positive reinforcement to strengthen behaviors exhibited by the athletes. Research has shown that many athletes prefer the positive reinforcement approach to increase motivation, performance, and the overall bond between the athlete and the coach. Lafrenière, Jowett, Vallerand, Donahue, and Lorimer (2008) uncovered that harmonious passion or engaging in the activity freely was positively associated with the formation and success coach-athlete relationship. Hampson and Jowett (2014) revealed in their study of 150 British football players that the perceptions of the coach's leadership, and the coach-athlete relationship were direct predictors for overall team efficacy. In other words, the more players felt their coach was a collaborative member of their group, the more positive the coach-athlete relationship was expressed and the higher overall percentage of team efficacy.

Jowett and Cockerill (2003) found in their interviews with 12 Olympic medallists the presence of a positive coach-athlete relationship was associated with feelings of closeness, trust, respect, and common goals. Davis and Jowett (2014) echoed the importance of a positive coach-athlete relationship in their study of 192 intercollegiate, club, national, and international athletes. They discovered that athletes who felt a secure attachment to their coach indicated feelings of social support, high levels of interdependence, and relationship depth (Davis & Jowett, 2014).

The negative or punishment approach has been documented as having negative side effects for athletes. Punishment when used in excessiveness can cause a complete lack of desire to complete a task by the athlete and a decrease in motivation and athletic performance (Maag, 2003; Smith, 2010). The punishment approach can cause issues such as lack of enjoyment, anxiety, dropout, injury, and a rift between the athlete and coach (Maag, 2003; Smith, 2010; Smith, Smoll, & Passer, 2002). Research has shown that coaches that use fear and punishment to prevent mistakes actually cause more mistakes to occur (Petri & Govern, 2004). The negative approach also causes a negative relationship between the coach and athlete. Research has found that the negative coach-athlete relationship has been associated with lack of emotional closeness and a lack of resources needed (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Gearity and Murray (2011) found negative coach-athlete relationships were due to coaches exhibiting behavior labelled as uncaring, unfair, inhibiting athlete's mental skills and athlete coping, distracting, engendering self-doubt, demotivating, and dividing the team. These coaching styles and behaviors indicated by the participants led to dropout, team conflict, and general lack of enjoyment in their given sports teams (Gearity & Murray, 2011). These studies demonstrate that the qualities of coach leadership and the formation and growth of a progressive coach-athlete relationship can lead to a high achieving and affirmative team culture, efficacy, and goals. Due to the importance of the coach-athlete relationship in the formula of organizational and team culture, it is important for this study to seek out information on how position specialists interpret their coaching staff's leadership, behaviors, and the relationship as it contributes to the overall team environment.

# CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

## Methodology

There has long been a conflict between the social (psychology, sociology, etc.) and natural sciences (chemistry, biology, etc.) in terms of research methods. Natural sciences were thought to be the more rigorous, empirical, and objective compared to social sciences, which were viewed as "soft" and theoretical (Christians & Carey, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a; Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Natural science research is grounded in positivist assumptions or that reality and or truth is singular and objective (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). This singular reality can be discovered, measured, and quantified (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Positivist researchers posit worth and value in quantitative research; research that can be examined in artificial settings, such as through surveys or experiments.

In contrast, qualitative research is grounded in the social sciences and the attempt to uncover and understand the ever-changing feelings, assumptions, emotions, and behaviors of human beings (Christians & Carey, 1989; Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described qualitative research in a thorough and descriptive definition as:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (p. 3).

Qualitative researchers take on the role of *bricoleur* or an individual who pieces together sets of customs to make a solution for a puzzle; the research process is messy and innovative because it explores the foundations of an individual or group of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013b; Goodson & Phillmore, 2004). To further expand the difference between quantitative and qualitative research, qualitative research is concerned with the creative process whereby people produce, maintain, and build symbols, cultures, and systems that assert and interpret meaning (Christians & Carey, 1989).

There are four main criteria and unique qualities to qualitative research compared to quantitative research: naturalistic observation, contextualization, maximized comparisons, and sensitized concepts. First, naturalistic observation explains the qualitative approach of the researcher becoming an observer and participant in the culture they are studying so deeply that they can reflect that culture's thoughts and experiences (Creswell, 2014; Christians & Carey, 1989). In naturalistic observation, the researcher looks to understand, communicate, and demonstrate the experiences of the studied culture through artifacts, language, and symbols (Creswell, 2014; Christians & Carey, 1989; Fetterman, 2010; Wolcott, 2008).

The second criterion for qualitative research is contextualization. Contextualization describes the process of setting the scene for the reader; the context must be provided when the behavior or environment is not routine or common knowledge (Christians & Carey, 1989). Since human life is ever evolving the context becomes key in qualitative research; in other words, "all meaningful contexts need clarification for behavior to be intelligible, for us to understand what people intend and the reasons they have for their actions" (Christians & Carey, 1989, p. 364). For example, a researcher could visit a baseball ballpark two different times, but the context is not the same. The first experience has influence on the second. There is also the possibility that

through the passing of time some of the nuances of that ballpark could be very different the second time and thus need to be re-explained and described.

The third criterion is known as maximized comparisons. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined maximized comparisons as a way of choosing comparison groups as a way to demonstrate distinct interpretations. This qualitative research strategy is used to give in-depth explanation as well as show the gross differences or similarities of two groups (Christians & Carey, 1989). For example, Geertz (1972) studied two Indonesian towns and their culture surrounding the cockfight. In his piece, Geertz (1972) focused on the culture, economic, and political development of the two towns. The use of two towns allowed for a comparison that elevated and made the concepts more precise. The final criterion for qualitative research is sensitized concepts. Sensitized concepts are explained as "formulating categories that are meaningful to the people themselves, yet sufficiently powerful to explain large domains of social experience" (Christians & Carey, 1989, p. 369). These sensitized concepts are important reference points for research. As they must be clear to negate misunderstanding and vagueness (Christians & Carey, 1989; Schultz, 1967). These concepts become unique and permanent contributions to the overall body of literature (i.e., the concept of thick description from Geertz, 1972). This study will contribute the sensitized concepts of position specialization by providing a clearer definition for this subset of athletes and contributing the factors that are valued and found unique to being a position specialist.

The field of sport studies has long been a part of the conflict between positivist and post-positivist approaches. The field of sport studies previously had been dominated by empirical exploration of the physicality of the human body through measurable, observable, mechanical, isolatable, and stable variables (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Hammersley, 1989; & Silk,

Andrews, & Mason, 2005). It was not until the early 1990s that qualitative research began to gain momentum and appearance in sport sciences, sport management, and sport psychology research (Brudstad, 2008; Culver, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2003; Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012).

Now in sport research more than ever, there is exploration of cultural, psychological, and sociology areas of sport (Brudstad, 2008; Silk, Andrews, & Mason, 2005). This qualitative research is seeking to capture the interaction between people and the construction of ideas behind concepts like sport culture, identity, politics, economics, and history (Silk, Andrews, & Mason, 2005). In order to understand the purpose and use of qualitative research in sport psychology and sport management fields, first an individual must understand the concepts of ontology and epistemology and how the traditions of qualitative research guide researchers towards his or her chosen methodology.

**Ontology and epistemology.** Before beginning a research project or study, a researcher must first have evaluated his or her inquiry paradigm. According to Goodson and Phillmore (2004), inquiry paradigm is described as a basic set of beliefs that the researcher has that shapes their worldview. This paradigm influences the researcher's understanding and actions taken when exploring a research problem (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a; Goodson & Phillmore, 2004). This inquiry paradigm can be broken down into ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Goodson & Phillmore, 2004). In other words, understanding the inquiry paradigm is similar to peeling an onion, each layer gets smaller and more specific as it is uncovered; moving from ontology, to epistemology, to methodology, to methods. Each layer of the inquiry paradigm affects what the researcher's questions are and the ways in which he or she seeks to answer them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a).

The first layer to uncover is ontology. Ontology by definition is "the study of reality, of being, of the real nature of whatever is, and concerned with understanding the kinds of things that constitute the world" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 190). Ontological assumptions in the qualitative realm look to answer the questions of "what is there that can be known?" or "what is the nature of reality?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 83). However, ontological assumptions for qualitative research are searching to discover the nature of reality in terms of the social world of meaning (Ahmed, 2008). In comparison, realistic ontology that is found in quantitative research is concerned with cause and effect relationships (Ahmed, 2008). In qualitative methodology, reality is not something that can be known, yet, people exist in a reality that they know. Thus, qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people come to accept their realities and how they produce these realities.

Epistemology compared to ontology describes, "the way an individual looks at the world and makes sense of it, or in other words, how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Epistemology, unlike ontology is concerned with the relationship between a researcher and knowledge or reality (i.e., how did the researcher come to the learning, conclusions, and insight on a said reality). Creswell (2014) used the term worldview to describe epistemology. He stated, "worldview is a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study" (p. 6). This worldview is formed based on experience, orientations, relationships, and inclinations held by the researcher; it is unique to each individual (Creswell, 2014). Epistemology is important for a researcher to comprehend because it is epistemology or the nature of knowledge that directs a researcher towards their research goals, research methods, and eventual contribution to the body of literature in their field (Brudstad, 2008; Schwandt, 2007).

**Three different epistemologies.** According to Crotty (1998) there are three major epistemologies that are used in social research: objectivism, constructionism, and subjectivism. First, objectivism epistemology is the view that "things exist independent of consciousness and experience, that they have truth and meaning residing in them as objects" (Crotty, 1998, p. 5). Brudstad (2008) explained that objectivism or positivists' belief is grounded in "the existence of immutable laws in the natural and social worlds that are unaffected by one's perspective and that can best be understood through reliance on objective scientific processes" (p. 33). Simply outlined, there are objective truths in the world waiting for discovery through scientific measures (Crotty, 1998). Individuals who possess an objectivist epistemology research from a positivist standpoint; they see the world and research as a process of discovering existent truths through experimentation, surveys, and cause and effect (Crotty, 1998; Neuman, 2015). This way of conducting research is used to confirm a set of probabilistic casual or generalizable laws that can predict pattern (Neuman, 2015). Objectivists not only believe that their process towards research should be objective, but also that their personal views, beliefs, and influences could cause bias and potentially compromise research (Brudstad, 2008).

The second epistemological stance, constructionism, is a complete distinction from objectivism. In the constructionist epistemology, truth or meaning is shared between individuals' interactions with one another and the realities of the world around them (Crotty, 1998). Many times the constructionist epistemological stance is also called interpretivism. Interpretive social science researchers are concerned with how individuals interact, form relationships with each other, and create and maintain their social world (Neuman, 2015). Meaning, realities, symbols, cultures are not discovered, but created (Crotty, 1998). This meaning making occurs in a social

context; it is important to understand the significance of behaviors, actions, language and their societal and cultural influences on individuals (Neuman, 2015).

Compared to the objectivist epistemology, constructionists believe that there are multiple truths or realities in existence; hence, there is no universal or generalizable truth (Crotty, 1998). Constructionists recognize limitations in the ability to distinguish and understand the world fully (Lincoln, Lyndham, & Guba, 2011). Also, in comparison to objectivism, theory is not tested through deductive processes, but theory emerges from the process of induction or generating knowledge through and between people's creation and interpretation of meaning and purpose (Brustad, 2008). Again in comparison to objectivism, constructionist thought is centered in the idea that an absolutist viewpoint cannot be taken with research; it is impossible to isolate oneself both personally and socially from the work (Brudstad, 2008).

Similar to the constructionist epistemological stance, subjectivism rejects that truth already exists in the world to be discovered. Instead, subjectivism believes that meaning is not shared, but imposed on objects from the subject (Crotty, 1998). In another definition, Schwandt (2007) defined subjectivism by explaining the thoughts of philosopher Edmund Husserl stating, "There is no real world that is wholly independent of the 'subject' that knows or experiences that world, and that the knowing subject does not itself belong to the world that it knows or expriences" (p. 279-280). This process of imposing meaning takes place within the mind; the world is a figment of the individual's imagination (Landauer & Rowlands, 2001). In subjectivism, objects could come from an individual's unconscious, dreams, religion, etc.; the key is that there is no interaction between the subject and the object (Crotty, 1998).

**Qualitative traditions.** Specifically, in qualitative research, there are three main traditions that branch out of ontology and epistemology. Lindloff and Taylor (2011) identify

three main theoretical traditions in qualitative research: the phenomenological tradition, the socio-cultural tradition and the critical tradition. First, the phenomenological tradition was established in contrast to positivism, which had long dominated social science research. In this tradition, research is concerned with the lived-experiences of individuals surrounding a single, shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The researcher is uncovering understanding about the phenomenon through the lens of those that experience it on a regular basis (Creswell, 2014). The phenomenological tradition stems from the work of field of hermeneutics, which was concerned with decoding ancient texts (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). In hermeneutics, the researcher attempts to interpret meaning to the texts through imagining him or herself in the role of the author in an attempt to gain greater knowledge (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011; Ricoeur, 1977; Schwandt, 2000). This uncovering process looks to find the essence that occurs in everyday instances in order to give a more in-depth and fuller meaning to the phenomena, or create a total picture (Crotty, 1998; Schultz, 1967).

In this tradition, the researcher must call into question his or her whole culture, manner of seeing the world, and try to make a new connection to the phenomena or new concept he or she is researching as if he or she had never learned it before (Crotty, 1998; Heron, 1992; Wolff, 1894). Crotty (1996a; 1998) described phenomenology as "an ability to lay aside, as best we can, the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication an enhancement of former meaning" (p. 78). Crotty (1996a; 1996b; 1998) explained that in the phenomenological tradition a researcher must try to bracket his or her first hand experience of the phenomena in order to explore the interpretive consciousness or the direct experience others have with the said phenomena. This bracketing is essential to phenomenology. Without the

bracketing of a researcher's personal experience, thoughts, an biases, the researcher would not be able to look at the phenomena being observed or explained with a fresh, unaltered look (Crotty, 1996a; 1996b; 1998; Hussell, 1931).

The second tradition in qualitative research is the socio-cultural tradition. In this tradition research is concerned with the relationship between the micro and macro levels of shared patterns of meaning and their influences (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). In exploring the micro level, the emphasis is placed on the individual, compared to the macro level where a more holistic approach is used a to explore a larger unit, such as an organization or community (Tichenor & McLeod, 1989). The two levels work together to provide rich and new insight; the individual or micro level explores motivation, attitude, and behavior, whereas, the macro level details cultural processes or societal patterns (Tichenor & McLeod, 1989). The socio-cultural tradition is a perspective describing people's behavior and mental processes as shaped in part by their social and/or cultural contact; the macro influences the micro (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

The third and final tradition in qualitative research is the critical tradition. Neuman (2015) explained that the critical tradition is "an approach to social research that emphasizes combating surface-level distortions, multiple levels of reality, and value-based activism through human empowerment" (p. 110). In other words, the critical tradition rejects ideas from both the phenomenological and socio-cultural. The critical tradition notes that phenomenology and socio-cultural traditions place the most importance in the individuals' viewpoints, whereas in the critical tradition, underlying issues that need change in society as a whole are the focus (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). In the critical tradition, researchers focus on taking a strong value position on areas that need social justice or criticism such as issues like: race, poverty, and politics (Neuman, 2015). This recognition of power and oppressive structures shapes and re-shapes shared

identities, relationships, and communities (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Compared to the two previous traditions, critical tradition is not just concerned with gaining knowledge about the world and individuals, but changing the world (Neuman, 2015). The critical tradition is founded in goals of exposing and transforming oppressive structures, hence why feminist theory, race theory, and queer theory fall under the critical tradition (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

**Strands of phenomenology.** Taking this branching approach a step further, phenomenology was chosen to guide this study. Phenomenology by definition is "the study of phenomena, things as they present themselves to, and are perceived in our consciousness" (Allen-Collinson, 2009). There are three major modern forms of phenomenological philosophies: constitutive, hermeneutic, and existentialist (Embree & Mohanty, 1997). Constitutive or transcendental phenomenology derived from the work of Edmund Husserl. In this strand of phenomenology, there is an awareness of not only being born in this world, but also acting in this world. This is explained as a state of consciousness of our thoughts, actions, and ideas and how they affect our world and the world of others (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Constitutive or transcendental phenomenology is mainly concerned with description and the ability of the researcher to bracket their beliefs or position about a phenomenon so he or she can approach the research with an attempt at objectivity (Allen-Collinson, 2009). This strand of phenomenology seeks to uncover the everyday experiences, things taken for granted, the unique nuances to a phenomenon through the words, behaviors, and attitudes of the participants (Crotty, 1998; O'Halloran, et al., 2016; Schultz, 1967).

The second strand is hermeneutic phenomenology. This strand uses an interpretive phenomenological tradition outlined through philosopher Martin Heidegger (Allen-Collinson, 2009; O'Halloran, et al., 2016). Heidegger like Husserl believed that phenomenology is

descriptive, but more importantly interpretive in nature. Bracketing is not possible because we cannot approach concepts entirely objective, or without any previous influences (Allen-Collinson, 2009). The focus is not simply placed on describing the phenomenon, but interpreting the meanings that are deposited and mediated through language, texts, myths, art, and narratives (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Interpretive phenomenology allows for a more personal input from the researcher; the researcher's thoughts, ideas, and suppositions are not bracketed, but encouraged (O'Halloran, et al., 2016). The researcher becomes a part of the data and meaning making activity, instead of focusing on trying to separate their consciousness and bias out of the research process.

The last strand of phenomenological approaches is existentialist phenomenology, which was highly influenced by Merleau-Ponty. Existentialist phenomenology is the idea that mind, body, and consciousness are interconnected and influential (Allen-Collison, 2009). This intertwined relationship is subjective in nature; there is a rejection of the thought that phenomena are out in the world to be discovered (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Existentialist phenomenology focuses on the physiological and psychological aspects of experiencing a phenomenon as well as the interactions between human and non-human bodies (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Weiss, 1999). All three strands of phenomenology have been used in sport and physical activity research to demonstrate the possibility of sport as embodiment for discovering a new idea. It is important to understand and recognize the different strands of phenomenology in order for the researcher to match his or her research questions and participants with the right approach.

**Phenomenology and sport research.** Sport management grew as a field grounded in quantitative research where numbers, data, and statistics has been the dominant research platforms (Olafson, 1990). Olafson (1990) found in his study of sport management research that

55% of research was done via surveys and only 7% was completed using interviews. However, over the past 30 plus years more studies using qualitative approaches have been published in sport management journals and presented at sport management conferences (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). Shaw and Hoeber (2016) found in a study of qualitative research published in the three major sport management journals (*Sport Management Review*, *Journal of Sport Management*, and *European Sport Management Quarterly*) that qualitative research visibility had increased since Olafson's (1990) study. The researchers discovered that 72 out of the 309 (23%) publications in the three journals between the years 2011-2013 were qualitative in research design and analysis, with the majority being case studies and semi-structured interviews (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016).

Phenomenology yet, is a fairly young research approach in the area of sport management even with the emergence of qualitative research over the past 30 years, but more research is emerging focusing on the lived-experiences of participants in order to bring awareness and understanding to various sport phenomena. For example, Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2007) explored the experience of injury and its repercussions with identity in two distance elite runners and found that rehabilitation caused conflict with athletic identity. Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2010) also completed an existentialist phenomenological study that examined the sense of touch and heat as it related to two long distance runners and one experienced scuba diver. The researchers discovered that touch, heat, and pressure were essential to the participants' regulation of their activities, enjoyment, or displeasure (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2010). Allen-Collinson's (2011) herself completed an autophenonemographic study on female long distance running. She investigated the experience of running through not only a phenomenological lens, but also a feminist and sociological viewpoint (Allen-Collinson, 2011).

Phenomenological studies in sport, however, are not limited to individual sporting experiences. Gearity and Murray (2011) used an existential phenomenological research method in their study of 16 athletes experiences with poor coaching and found that poor coaching led to an inhibiting affect of the athlete's mental skills, coping, ability to relate to the coach. In contrast, Becker (2009) used existentialist phenomenology to explore 18 elite athletes' (national team, Olympic team, intercollegiate Division I sport, or professional sport) experiences with great coaching. She found that the participants identified great coaches as teachers and mentors, professional, passionate, experienced, and imperfect (Becker, 2009). Cronin and Armour (2015) also used interpretive phenomenology to understand the essence of four youth sport coaches and found that care, commitment to teaching and learning, and teamwork were all qualities needed to work in youth sport and achieve excellence in coaching. These studies are not an exhaustive list of phenomenological studies used to explore sport experiences, but they do give a glimpse on some of the areas phenomenology has been applied to in the sport context (i.e., coaching and individual sport experiences).

**Theoretical framework.** Based on the exploration of the difference between quantitative and qualitative methodology as well as the traditions of qualitative research, this study will purposely be grounded in a qualitative methodological approach. A qualitative approach was selected due to the essence of qualitative research being founded in the social construction of meaning (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Qualitative research looks to uncover how the meanings created, shared, and explored by participants, groups, or cultures. For a qualitative researcher, gaining a sense of understanding into the experiences and sense of realities shared by participants is more important than acquiring numbers, percentages, or comparisons (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). In other words, qualitative research looks to highlight the meaning or "why" behind an

idea or phenomenon by uncovering the deeply rooted and accepted realities or thoughts, behaviors, and feelings of the participants.

This study uses a qualitative approach for a number of reasons. First, the focus is not on identifying the number of student-athletes that identify as position specialists, but instead, focuses on understanding what a position specialists means to each participant. The emphasis is placed on the ideas, thoughts, and feelings behind the term position specialists for each of the participants; or the discovery of their reality associated with the phenomenon of position specialization (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

Second, the rich descriptions from the participants can shed light and understanding that could cause change (Alversson & Gabriel, 2013). These themes, quotes, or thoughts can provide opportunities for sport organizations to recognize needs for improvement, create a more inclusive culture, or organizational/team engagement (Alversson & Gabriel, 2013). Third and most importantly, since this study is searching to discover the possibility and meaning behind the phenomenon of position specialization, then a traditional objectivist viewpoint must be rejected (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). The researcher is not looking for a truth in objects found through the scientific method, but instead is searching to reveal the unique and personal socially constructed and influenced experiences of the participants (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). Finally, since this study is rejecting the objectivist mindset, it is not searching to be generalizable to a mass population, but instead encourages "reflection, critique, emancipation, and cultural, social and political awareness. Its purpose is to engage in emotion and belief to help to understand the messiness of life" (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016, p.259).

**Epistemology.** Since epistemology is described as, "the way an individual looks at the world and makes sense of it, or in other words, how we know what we know", a

constructionist/interpretivist epistemology will be used to guide this study. (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Due to the research study being posited in a need to discover the phenomenon of position specialization, an epistemology that is focused on creating, constructing, and interpreting meaning was necessary and essential. To further explain this interpretative viewpoint, Crotty (1998) illustrated,

> that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that these things have for them; that the meaning of such things is derived from, and arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (p. 72).

It is important to approach the ideas of position specialization interpretively to gain an understanding of how these concepts are constructed, explained, expressed, and influential in the lives of the participants. Focusing on the experience of the student-athletes allows participants to share how they make meaning of reality in their world and provides rich description of this unique experience.

**Phenomenological tradition and framework**. The theoretical framework is an essential component to a qualitative research study. The framework provides a lens or an overall orientation for the study's questions (Creswell, 2014). This lens guides the researcher on what areas or issues need to be uncovered and helps narrow the focus on the participants that should be studied (Creswell, 2014). This lens is discovered through the researcher stating and being aware of his or her ideological position (Holliday, 2012). This ideological position affects the research setting selected, the participants selected, and the relationship or interaction between the researcher and the researched (Holliday, 2012).

The hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenological framework is best suited for this study due to its focus on highlighting, describing, and examining the lived-experiences of a phenomenon (O'Halloran, Littlewood, Richardson, Tod, & Nesti, 2016). Although the socio-cultural tradition and the exploration of the micro component of the position specialists in the team environment (macro) could have been used to explore this research, phenomenology presents a more focused and useful tradition. Phenomenology allows an open dialogue centered in the participant's interpretation of the phenomenon (Dale, 1996). In other words, the participant is the expert providing the researcher with thick and rich description (Dale, 1996).

In comparison, the socio-cultural tradition is concerned with how the individual is affected by the macro or organization, community, culture; the emphasis is placed on the meaning making relationship between the two levels (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011; Tichenor & McLeod, 1989). Since this study is concerned with describing the participants' perceptions, thoughts, and emotions regarding position specialization, phenomenology is necessary. Spinelli (2005) explained that phenomenology is "distinguished by its central concern with the issue of intentionality-derived experience and its plethora of self/other (or world) focused manifestations" (p. 33). Compared to the socio-cultural tradition the value is not placed directly on the interaction/relationship between the individual and society, but solely on the individual's understanding (Spinelli, 2005).

**Social Identity Theory.** Based on the study's goal to discover the phenomenon or the attitudes, perceptions, and socially shared views of position specialists, Social Identity Theory was used to guide this study. Social Identity Theory explains that individuals form categories of "us" and "them" or the "in" and "out" groups based on same and shared characteristics (Tajfel &Turner, 1986). This separation between the "in" and "out" groups is dependent on boundaries

that are impermeable and the relationship within each group is stable and secure (Rees, Haslam, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2015). In an essence, if the "in" and "out" groups understand their distinctions from one another and these distinctions are clear and known by group members. Many times this separation is heighted by high and low status groups. For example, this takes place in sporting competitions where groups or teams are striving for the high status of superiority like league champions, whereas a low group status might be the status of most improved team (Rees et al., 2015). Particularly in sport research, Social Identity Theory has been applied to highlight the "us" vs. "them" fan identity and attendance or the idea of group comparison based on competition and resources (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Trail et al., 2003, Sanderson, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Whigham, 2014).

Sanderson (2013) found in his content analysis of social media relating to Brian Kelly's move to head football coach of Notre Dame from Cincinnati, that Cincinnati fans group identity strengthened due to the threat to their football program. This resulted in social media posts that focused on rallying around the University of Cincinnati and its football program while using intimidation and degrading Kelly and Notre Dame football program which in turn created a rivalry. Although this is an extreme example, Sanderon's (2013) study demonstrates how these categories of "in" and "out" groups are taken a step further to form an identity; those in the "in" group begin to share ideas, thoughts, and adopt the overall group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

This adoption of overall group identity also causes coordinated behavior and motivations to match the group identity (Rees, et al., 2015). An individual moves beyond an "in" group membership, but instead the individually becomes deeply ingrained in the values of this group. Becoming part of an "in" group necessitates that an individual's perceptions, world viewpoint,

and reactions are altered by the shared norms of that group. For example, Levine, Prosser, and Evans (2005) completed a study based on fan membership with English soccer fans. In the first scenario participants were asked to think about their Manchester United fandom before walking across to another building. During the walk a person wearing a Manchester, Liverpool, or just plain t-shirt falls and trips. When the tripped individual was wearing a Manchester shirt, participants were 92% more willing to ask them if they needed assistance, compared to only 32% when the individual was wearing a Liverpool shirt (Levine, et al., 2005).

Social Identity Theory has also been used in sport research to explain sporting phenomena such as sporting or team formation, group dynamics, group behavior, and how factors such as stress, leadership, and support influence the group processing (Rees, et al., 2015). Levine and Reicher (1996) found in their study of injured female athletes that the athletes assessed their stress or ability to cope with the injury differently based on the category of woman and athlete. Jonecheray, Level, and Richard (2014) found in a study of 12 female French national rugby players that the women who were socialized and identified as rugby players embraced masculine qualities and did not feel the pressure to succumb to societal norms of femininity. Social Identity Theory has also been used to explain the phenomena of athletes making personal and monetary sacrifices for the sake of the team; group success, need, and goal achievement becomes the shared group identity (Fransen, Haslam, & Steffens, 2015; Gundlach, Zivunska, & Stoner, 2006; Quay & Stolz, 2014).

All of these studies are examples of how Social Identity Theory has been applied to a wide spectrum of topics in sport research. Based on Social Identity Theory's pairing with studies to discover sport phenomena, Social Identity Theory was used to guide this study. Again, the purpose of this study was to uncover the experiences of position specialists that make them

unique in their team sport environment in comparison to their peers. Thus, Social Identity Theory as a guiding framework can provide context to how position specialists explain their experiences as shared “in” or “out” group members, management for these perceptions, and implications for overall team culture and development.

**Methods**

Due to the use of a phenomenological methodology, interviews were used in this study in order to increase awareness of the participants' experiences and inner thoughts as they pertain to being position specialists (Corbin & Straus, 2008). Interviews allowed for the use of direct quotations from the study participants in order to achieve great detail and insight. Interviews were used because of their ability to assist in discovering meaning of fundamental themes in the participants’ lives (Kvale, 1996). Discussion or a free-flowing conversation is the foundation of interviews, and use the open-ended questions provided an opportunity for the participants to express their feelings and perceptions related to position specialization (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The purpose of this study was to discover the lived-experiences of position specialists in a team sport environment.

Interviews permitted interaction between the interviewer and participant as opposed to open-ended survey questions or quantitative research, which are typically completed, by the participant in isolation. Interviews allowed for follow up questions, which serve to further probe participants and clarify original answers. Free flowing and participant directed interviews were specifically utilized in this study because the format allowed participants to completely explain their experience and shed light on the existence and interworking of the phenomenon. Institutional Review Board approval was received to ensure the integrity of the study, the safety of the participants, and the researchers.

**Bracketing and positionality.** As part of using a phenomenological research approach, bracketing was essential in order to keep the researcher's thoughts, opinions, and biases out of the story of the participants (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Bracketing is the process of the ability of the researcher separating his or her beliefs or position about a phenomenon so he or she can approach the research with an attempt at objectivity (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Although completely bracketing one's experiences is impossible, it was important for the researcher to be aware of her biases that could affect language, question choice, and overall demeanor in an interview (Allen-Collinson, 2009).

Particularly, this research study was started out of my personal interest in the idea or phenomenon of position specialist. I not only specialized in the sport of softball at the age of 12, but also the position of pitcher. This specialization was continued into intercollegiate athletics where I continued to only play and participate in the position of pitcher within the sport of softball. Through my personal intercollegiate pitching career, I found opportunities for leadership, spotlight, and glory, but also exclusion, isolation, and sadness. Through these personal feelings this research interest was created. The study originally stemmed from wanting to understand if others who specialize in a particular position had similar feelings or experiences as my own. However, this research project has expanded to a desire to shed light or capture the experiences of position specialists as a whole.

In order to demonstrate bracketing, the researcher piloted a former collegiate position specialist to ensure biases did not interfere or emerge in the interview process. The researcher also sought out a professional working in social work to practice probing during the interview process and once again ensure that biases did not emerge. During the interview process, the

researcher was clear to illustrate that the purpose was to understand the experiences of the participants and that the participants were the experts on the topic, not the researcher.

**Sampling.** Purposive or specific criterion sampling was used to identity participants (Patton, 2002). The participants had be current or active NCAA members of a team sport and played a specialized position within that team sport such as pitcher, kicker, punter, or goalie. The sampling was originally excluded to Division I and Power 5 institutions in order to include athletes competing at the highest level of intercollegiate athletics; however, due to the lack of participation of Division I athletes, an addendum to the IRB was added to include Division II and III position specialist athletes. All potential participants were identified through the help of sports information directors at identified institutions. The researcher specifically searched for all Division I, II, and III athletic departments within a five hour radius of the researcher's institution; this radius was established due to the potential for the researcher to travel and interview participants in person. One hundred and ten emails were sent to sports information directors from 59 institutions (40 Division I, seven Division II, and 10 Division III). This email was approved by the IRB (see addendum 5). Sports information directors were asked to identify potential position specialists who fit the criteria and asked for permission and assistance in contacting potential position specialists student-athlete participants through passing on an informational email about the study procedures and research questions. Fifty-three potential participants were indicated and contacted via e-mail explaining the purpose of the study and asking for their willingness to participate; again this email was approved by the IRB (see addendum 6).

Out of the 53 potential participants, 29 were Division I athletes, four Division II athletes, and 20 Division III athletes. These 53 potential participants represented eight sports: men's

hockey (1), women's hockey (1), women's lacrosse (3), women's soccer (6), men's soccer (5), baseball (10), softball (7), and football (20). Out of the 53 participants, 33 agreed to participate in the study, but only 21 participants signed the consent form and completed the interviews.

Out of the 21 position specialists that participated in the study, eight were Division I athletes, two were Division II, and 11 were Division III athletes. Their sport participation broke down as: baseball (5), softball (5), football (2), women's soccer (3), men's soccer (2), women's hockey (1), men's hockey (1), women's lacrosse (2) (see appendix 10). The participants ranged in the amount of scholarship money they were awarded for their position and sport with only one athlete indicating a full scholarship, 11 participants indicating no money (10 of those were Division III athletes-no athletic scholarships are given in Division III), and the average amount between those awarded scholarship money being around 48%. It is important to note that two participants did not feel comfortable identifying their scholarship amount, but noted they were on some sort of athletic scholarship. The participants had a large range for the age they began specializing in their sport (4-18) and position (8-17). The average age for specializing in their sport was around 11 years old and the mode was 15 years old (4). The average age for specializing in their position was around 12 years old and the mode was 10 years old (4); see appendix 10).

The participants' ages ranged from 18-22, with an average of 20-years old. The participants broke down by academic class as followed: freshmen (5), sophomores (8), juniors (3), and seniors (5). All of the participants except for three indicated their race as Caucasian; the three that did not identified as African-American (2), and Bi-Racial (2), specifically Caucasian and Mexican. The population was close to evenly split based on gender; with 11 female and 10

male participants. All of the participants indicated they were heterosexual and single (see appendix 9).

**Procedure.** The study was approved through institutional review board (see appendix 3). The participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were asked to provide written consent to participate by signing an informed consent form (see appendix4). A demographic questionnaire was attached to the consent form in order to provide the researcher more information about sex, age, and sport experience (see appendix 7). Interviews were conducted via telephone or in person and were audio recorded for transcription. These interviews were focused on a grand tour question in order to avoid leading a participant (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Interviews lasted from 16 minutes to 48 minutes with an average of 28. Further questions or probes flowed from the dialogue and were not prepared in detail in advance (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Interviews were transcribed and formatted for analysis by the principle investigator and then sent back to the participants for member-checking (Merriam, 2009).

**Research Questions.** Again, the research questions for this study were as followed**:**

RQ1: What are the lived-experiences of position specialists in a team sport environment?

RQ2: What contexts or situations have impacted or influenced their experiences of position specialization?

RQ3: How has the occurrence of position specialization affected their experience of team culture/ team dynamics?

**Analysis.** After the interviewing and transcription process took place, the researcher sent the transcriptions back to the participants for member-checking (Merriam, 2009). Member-checking is a process that allows the participant to read over the transcribed transcripts and make

edits or add any additional or missing material (Merriam, 2009). After the member-checking process took place, a grounded theory approach to analysis was used. In the grounded theory approach, an emphasis is placed on constant comparative data analysis.

During constant comparative data analysis, one segment of data is compared to another in order to find similarities and differences (Merriam, 2009). Data are grouped together based on a similar dimension; these groups become the categories of the study. The data will be first formed through open and in-vivo coding to find as many categories as possible (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Open coding is the process of going into the data line by line and constructing unrestricted chunks of codes based on coherent meaning (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011; Strauss 1987; Spiggle, 1994). In-vivo coding differs from open coding in that these codes are created from direct words, phrases or quotations by the participants (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Both open and in-vivo coding will be used first to excavate the data on a beginning, or surface level (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

After the initial first set of coding took place, a second set of coding known as axial coding began that dove into the data more deeply searching for meaning, characteristics, and attribute dimensions (Saldaña, 2013). Then the codes were compared to another to combine and narrow the categories. These categories essentially when through a compare and contrast process; the categories showed differences and similarities and were collapsed accordingly (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011; see appendix 8). From this narrowed coding procedure, a codebook was created. A codebook is a tool used for cataloging and documenting the codes created, it labels which category they belong with, the number of codes, and the location of the codes in the transcripts (Weston et al., 2001).

During the entire coding process the researcher participated in theoretical memoing. In theoretical memoing, the researcher fleshed out thematic meaning to the categories; this rich detail was used in the findings write-up to support the conception, naming, and selection of quotations to support the categories (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

Finally, the categories continued to narrow through a process called *dimensionalizati*on. In dimensionalization, each category is examined under its construct and then compared back to the incident that created the construct (Spiggle, 1994). Dimensionalization took place until the categories reached theoretical saturation, or other data added little to the category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Once the categories were solidified, themes were created and quotes were pulled to illustrate each theme. Pseudonyms were used in the findings to protect the participants' anonymity.

# CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

## Themes

Three hundred and fourteen initial codes were conceived from the transcripts of the 21 position specialist participants. These codes were narrowed down and collapsed into 25 categories. Through the process of dimensionalization, seven themes emerged from the interviews with the position specialists: (a) Stepping up and standing out, (b) All pressure, no forgiveness, (c) It's all about the mental game, (d) Put yourself in my shoes, (e) Positive team culture, leadership, and bond with a subtheme of When it's negative, it's toxic, (f) Sport is a family experience, and (g) Sport is foundational in my life.

More specifically, the themes were explained as: Stepping up and standing out, or accidental exposure to specialized position, specialization created college sport opportunity and training is highly individualized. Second, the theme of all pressure, no forgiveness expressed that position specialists saw their position as unforgiving, high level of pressure is the nature of their position, and the dynamics between receiving glory or blame for performances, and the responsibility to control the game. Third, the theme of it's all about the mental game was based on the idea that specialist have to obtain a high mental game to perform through high confidence, mental toughness, and resiliency. Next, the theme of put yourself in my shoes examined the lack of understanding and respect from teammates, coaches, and fans that position specialists felt, along with a need for specialized training and coaching. Next, the theme of positive team culture, leadership, and bond with a subtheme of when it's negative, it's toxic expressed that position specialists felt included a positive team atmosphere, had a close bound with coaches and other specialists, however, the subtheme revealed that isolation also occurred. Sport is a family experience as a theme explained that family influence to begin sport and family support

throughout sport were crucial to the athletes' experiences. Finally, the last theme of sport is foundational in my life detailed that sport provided opportunities for growth, identity, and uncertainty and excitement for transition out of sport.

**Stepping up and standing out.** All of the participants in the study indicated they began playing sports at a young age with the youngest starting age of three and the oldest starting age of nine-years old. Out of the 21 participants, only six specified that they specialized in their sport early in their childhood; the other 15 participants specified playing multiple sports during their youth and adolescents or participating in sport sampling. Interestingly, many of the participants, particularly the goalies discussed that becoming specialists in their position happened accidentally. Anna outlined that her first experience as the soccer goalie she was thrown into. She said,

> One day my coach was like Anna we want you to play goalie. It was kinda like you were thrown in the situation. A lot of people rotate goalie when you are young, but they put me there and I guess I did well in that game so I stayed there.

Gary, a men's soccer goalie also expressed that he was thrown into his position due to an absence from another goalie. He stated,

> When the goalkeeper that usually played had to go to some church event, and couldn't make it, they turned me into a goalie during a tournament. I guess that I played pretty well because ever since then it's been my position mainly.

Olivia, a women's soccer goalie echoed the trial and error approach to playing the position of goalie. She expressed, "When I hit middle school we didn't have a goalkeeper so I said sure I would try it. So I tried it and then I knew it was the position that I knew I wanted to get best at." Victor also fell in love with the position of soccer goalie by chance. He explained,

> There was this one game, when I was 12, and they told me to play goalie because our goalkeeper wasn't there. That's when I played and I absolutely loved the position and started playing it ever since.

In comparison to the other participants, Ethan, a college punter and kicker detailed that his accidental move into punting came during his high school All-American game. He expressed,

> In my All-American game, the punter got hurt the first day and went home. So they asked if I could punt. I was like, I punted in high school, but I really never took it seriously. In high school, you could have a bad punt, and everyone would be like, wow, good punt. But, in my All American game, I did really good. I had a freak day, I don't want to tell the coaches here (at his college) that, but I had a freak day and they saw that somehow and said hey, this kid can punt. At the time I couldn't, but now that I got here and focused on it, I can.

***Specialization created college sport opportunity***. Despite some of the participants explaining that their introduction to their specialized position was accidental, many of the participants were adamant that specializing in their sport and particularly their position was their best chance to play at the next level. Fred, a baseball pitcher said, "I decided I just wanted to pitch since that was my best avenue to play college baseball." Like Fred, Will, a baseball pitcher, talked about his projectability at the college level in terms of success being dependent on being a pitcher. He stated,

> I think with my height, like throughout high school I kind of knew that if I was going to get recruited or whatnot it was going to be for pitching because that was essentially the only spot I had any potential or projectability if you will.

Mary, a women's soccer goalie also talked about how in high school she quit volleyball to focus on being recruited to play soccer in college. She explained,

> I've been playing soccer for so long I was determined that I wanted to do that. In high school, I stopped playing volleyball because I had a big moment where I had to choose between volleyball and soccer because I'd started to really like volleyball. I was going to try to play travel volleyball and travel soccer and my dad said that is not possible, you have to choose one. I had kind of set some goals for myself when I was younger that I really wanted to play college soccer.

Derek and Ethan, both football punters discussed that although the played other positions on their high school football team they recognized punting would allow them to play at Division I colleges. Derek expressed,

> I made that decision because I knew that was probably my best chance of playing in college. I wouldn't be able to play at this level at the other positions. I knew if I did really good at punting I had a chance. And I knew that I had a good leg and I had a better chance of that then playing other positions.

Ethan echoed stating,

> The end of my sophomore year I realized I wanted to play college football, but I was 5'10, so I wasn't going to play center or middle linebacker in college. I knew that I had a strong leg from soccer, so I'll try kicking. And then, not even two months into it, I was pretty good, People were talking to me, so I rolled with it.

***Highly individualized practice***. All of the participants discussed the training they received at their current college was highly individualized in comparison to their teammates. Fred stated the difference simply saying,

> The way we practice, what we practice, the amount of running, or the type of lifts we do. Just every aspect is different. Anything we do is always separated from the rest of the guys. It's a different workout, practice, and conditioning.

The participants discussed extra practices or practicing before or after the rest of the team. For example, Bethany, a softball pitcher said,

> We will come to practice an hour or so earlier. We will have a different workout every single day. We will get that done and everyone (other teammates) will come in around practice time and warm up and stuff while we are finishing up our bullpen.

Vivian, another softball pitcher explained that as a specialist she is expected to complete extra workouts outside of practice. She stated, **"**We have bullpen two times a week where we have to pitch 2 extra times on our own. One day a week, it will be like a conditioning day." Nancy, a lacrosse goalie also spoke to having practice as a goalies group. She explained,

> We do have individual practices where we will come out an hour before practice during the fall ball season with all the goalies together. We will do shooting drills, clearing drills. The coaches will work with us a little bit more one on one.

Henry explained that as a hockey goalie he has an individual practice within the team practice. He expressed,

> For example, today at practice with players were working on specific stuff in one zone and goaltenders we had the other side of the ice so we could work on more technical stuff. Or all the time we are in a team atmosphere, but if it is a skill or special position we separate ourselves from the team. We still have the same schedule, the same training as them. I guess for preparation it is individual to every athlete or that we have individual separation, but our preparation is way different than everybody.

Anna echoed the individual practice experience that she shares with her goalkeepers. She explained,

> We all work as a unit as goalkeepers, but at the same time, at practice, I'm obviously doing completely different things than what my team is doing. We have to do specific drills using our hands. We have goalkeepers practice, so we will have separate practice from the team to individualize our needs as goalkeepers.

**All Pressure, no forgiveness.** One of the most prevalent and highly emphasized qualities that all the participants discussed in some capacity was this sense of elevated pressure felt in their position compared to their teammates. The participants, especially the goalies talked about how there was an elevated sense of pressure because they experienced the game completely different than their teammates. The position players were responsible for scoring or receiving the glory, while position specialist roles were unforgiving.

Mary explained that since the perception is that goalies only have one job that others believe they should always perform at a high level. She said, “Since it's your one job, that's all you have to do all game, your mistakes are picked apart because a lot more is expected out of you.” Sarah, a women’s hockey goalie expressed the unforgiving viewpoint in her responsibilities as goalie. She stated, “You always get some flack when you are the goalie and that is your job to keep the puck out of the net.” Victor put it simply stating, “You are the last man for having the ball go into the net. It is your position; it is your job to keep the ball out of the net. Every goal that gets scored on you, yes it hurts.” Anna also talked about the difference between the goals of her position in comparison to her teammates in that it is highly individualistic. She asserted that the difference is based on the forgiveness. A missed goal by a

position player is forgiven, but a missed goal by a goalie is seen as a crucial mistake in the game. She said,

> It is hard because what they (position players) are experiencing in a game is different than what I'm experiencing in a game. If we go into penalty kicks or something, you have to score the goal, but I've got to not let them go in.

Derek discussed the pressure and uncertainty of having a limited opportunity to make the right play or do his job. He expressed, "You only get so many opportunities. I would only get so many plays out there. So if I mess up on one punt, whose is to say I get another one the rest of the game?"

***Glory vs. blame.*** Secondly, this sense of pressure was discussed in terms of glory vs. blame. Henry discussed the pressure of being the deciding factor between a win and a loss in his position as a goaltender in hockey. He stated,

> Being a goaltender, everybody says there's a lot of pressure on your shoulders because well, I've always used the analogy that you can be a hero or a zero. So it's all your fault or all your success in a way, even though it's a team sport. It's like goalkeeping is an individual sport within the team atmosphere.

Gary detailed how the pressure of being a goalie can cause a lack of confidence and internalization of blame. He said,

> Sometimes when you are back there and your team is losing 4 to nothing. It can definitely take a toll on your confidence. Probably in your ego you are thinking the team is upset with you even though all the goals are not your fault, and only one of them maybe you could have made a save.

Bethany also alluded to the stress of receiving the blame for a loss or praise for a win. She said, "If you win, you are the greatest pitcher ever. But if you lose, man you suck, that was your fault." Fred also discussed the extremes between successful and poor performances and how he is a victim of self-blame. He explained, "If I pitched well and we won, I was on top of the world. Even if I didn't pitch great and we still lost, I felt like it was the majority of it was on me. Ethan emphasized the role media, fans, and even teammates play in adding to this narrative of blame or glory. He asserted,

> There definitely is a pressure. There is one second left on the clock and it's you out there, if you make it you win. If you miss it, you lose. And there is no really any other scenario at the end of a game where someone will have all that pressure. Quarterback throwing a 'hail Mary', then if the quarterback messes up, they can blame it on the wide receiver or vice versa. If you miss a field goal, you missed the field goal. At the college level, it's the only position that I can think of, if you do well, you are the absolute hero. If you do bad, you are hated.

Irene explained how as a softball pitcher or the center of attention in the game, the blame falls on you if a mistake is made. She posited,

> When you see a ball go over the fence the first person you're going to think of is the pitcher. They are not going to think the center fielder didn't jump over the fence and get it. They're going to think why did the pitcher throw the ball over the middle of the plate. There's definitely a lot of pressure and a lot of expectations.

***Control of the game***. The last factor that led to the elevated sense of pressure felt by the participants, especially pitchers, was the ability to control or direct the game. Kevin, a baseball pitcher explained that as a pitcher he is responsible for setting the pace of the game,

> Pitchers control the game. We can speed up the game. We can slow down the game. You have the ball. Whatever you do the team feeds off of that. Essentially, whatever pitches we throw can determine where a batter hits the ball. So you can control in that aspect of the game.

Catherine, a softball pitcher revealed that, like Kevin, there is pressure in controlling the game and that not everyone wants to be a pitcher due to this responsibility. She expressed, "One of their main responsibilities is to set the pace of the game. They have the control on the field. It just takes a special person to master that." Will explained that in comparison to teammates, he has a higher level of involvement. He said, "You are involved in every pitch. Fielders have to be ready for every pitch, but they are not involved in every pitch." Rita, a softball pitcher reiterated that the control felt by a pitcher is the separating factor from other positions on the field. She stated,

> I'm a pitcher, I'm starting the game, I have the ball in my hand every single play or pitch. I'm starting it. You really have to focus in deeper, whereas if you're playing third base they're not going to hit it to you every single time. You're not going to have to cover every single time.

Although the pressure felt by each participant differed in range and type, each participant expressed adamantly that their higher sense of pressure separated them from their teammates. They also discussed that as a position specialist being able to properly handle high levels pressure, blame, and control detached them from their non-specialist peers.

**It's all about the mental game**. Another highly emphasized quality that all the participants discussed in some capacity was the mental game. The participants felt that the mental approach or game made them unique in comparison to their teammates, specifically,

ideas of a strong mental game or the elevated need for mental toughness, resiliency, and confidence. Will explained that as a specialist, as a pitcher, that mental focus has to be present in each pitch and play compared to other positions on the field. He said,

> I think as a pitcher, every pitch you have to be in the right mind frame, every pitch. Because if you kind of relax or what not, you can give up a mistake and get taken out really quickly if you keep doing that. So I think as a pitcher, the mindset is much different and much more challenging throughout a game compared to another positions.

Anna echoed the elevated mental side of being a specialist in comparison to position players. Like Will she explained that the mentality of a goal keeper is difficult, but necessary. She detailed,

> I would say the mentality of the goalkeeper is 10 times different than the mentality of the field player. It's a hard position. I think half of it is mental and the stresses of the team, relying on you not to make a mistake, and if you do make a mistake you are going to lose the game.

Derek described that in his position mental focus is crucial to block out external factors and perform optimally. He said, "It is more mental for punters and kickers. You are not really getting hit or anything. So it is just being able to block out the crowd noise or just your self-talk." Gary detailed the unpredictability in his position requires an elevated mental game or focus. He stated,

> Hopefully in the game you only have to see a couple shots or make a few saves. But there are some games, you have that one shot and have to make that big save or you'll have fifteen shots and have to make seven saves.

Quinn, a lacrosse goalie also reflected that a specialist has to be prepared for unpredictability, but also be able to make mental decisions quickly. She expounded,

> I have to get my second to breathe on the field while communicating to my defense or seeing the ball get turned over and come back down the field and get myself calmed down. It's like 2 seconds. I have to have a lot faster reaction time with getting my mental set compared to field players.

***Mental toughness***. More specifically, some of the participants indicated their belief, confidence in their abilities, and sense of control separated them from other players on their teams. Rita explained her mindset for games and her unshakeable belief in herself by saying,

> When I'm in the circle, I need to have the mindset that nobody is better than me, this batter is not going to touch this ball. I've worked harder on my pitching than this batter has worked on hitting and I'm going to spin the ball as tight as I can, I am going to whip my arm through as quick as I can. You need this bulldog attitude of competitiveness.

Similarly, Kevin explained this attitude, swagger, and his belief despite of the competition he faced. He stated, “I'm not cocky or anything but, I come in knowing like this is my time, I'm ready to come in, I'm getting ready to shut it down. I know I’m better than the hitter I am facing.” Mary expanded on mental toughness highlighting the importance of possessing a dominant and confident attitude to play a specialized position. She posited, “It is funny because goalkeepers definitely have to have a certain attitude, not like overconfident, but you definitely have to be confident in what you are doing and not be timid at all.” Jared and Travis, both baseball pitchers, also reiterated this importance of an attitude or high belief. Jared said in regards to his mental game before he pitches, “I'm ready to go out and pitch. Just to walk it in, like a mind set of let’s go, ready to run, and get a win for my team.” Travis described that since baseball pitchers cannot take as many repetitions as position players due to the stress on their arms, the mental toughness approach was crucial. He stated,

> With pitching, it's a lot more mental as far as getting better off the field, you either have to watch videos or think about it because you can't go down there everyday and practice it. You can only do that one or twice a week. So between that you have to think about it all the time if you want to get better. You don't see your results immediately. It is about belief in your preparation and yourself. You have to have more mental toughness in my opinion.

***Resiliency.*** Participants also indicated that the mental game included resiliency, or the ability to move on to the next play or bounce back from mistakes. Ethan described this sense of resiliency by stating, **"**The mentality of kicking is to focus on the next kick. If you messed up that one, just go on to the next one." Sarah discussed this ability to bounce back and remain positive despite failure. She said,

> It really comes down to goalkeepers being able to give up a goal and bounce back, have confidence going into the game even if they came off a loss the last time they played. It's a lot more mental and strategic.

Will described that he has tried to incorporate the ideas behind resiliency into his pitching routine to elevate his performance. He said, "At least when I am on the mound I try to after every pitch reset, refocus, and focus on the next pitch. Because honestly the last pitch doesn't count anymore, it is all about the next pitch." Henry detailed that for the goaltending position in hockey that "it is 50% physical, 50% psychological." Specifically he explained the importance of resiliency to demonstrate leadership to teammates.

> You always have to be calm. You always have to trust your instincts. And when something happens, you kind of have to bounce back, or get over it and still be as strong

> mentally and physically as in one of your best games because your teammates are looking to you. They are looking for you to show you are just stronger mentally.

Victor specifically warned that allowing losses or mistakes to linger could have detrimental affects as the season progressed. He said, “You can’t let it get to you or else it’s going to affect you in the long run, if you keep letting yourself down after every loss or every bad game.” Nancy also reiterated the importance of resiliency to maintain leadership and team moral, “You always are trying to keep your head up and try not to be too hard on yourself. As a goalie, you can't really have those off-days because it throws off the entire team.”

***Confidence***. Finally, some of the position specialists particularly targeted that the emphasis on the mental game also meant confidence in one’s abilities and the high belief in achievable success for themselves and their teammates. Mary indicated that confidence was a lack of hesitation and belief in her ability by stating,

> If you are going to do something you need to do it with confidence. If you are going out for ball you need to go out for a ball and be able to take someone out, don’t hesitate before you do it.

Rita discussed her confidence in her ability to handle pressure and the high stakes of pitching in a tight game. She explained,

> I found that I pitch better under pressure. I feel like I focus more, buckle down more. If I've got bases loaded, two outs, full count, bottom of the 7th inning, we are up by one, something like that, I feel like I have to dig a lot deeper. I know I can get the job done.

Vivian indicated that confidence was more than just a belief in the self, but also a belief in her training and abilities to create a sense of feeling prepared. She said about confidence and being a

position specialist, “You have to have a stronger mentality, I think. You have to have more confidence in your abilities and preparation. You have to know you are ready.”

Gary emphasized that confidence was crucial to his role as a goalie due to the fact that he must motivate his team. He said, “Your confidence always has to be high as well for the whole team will feed off of that. It's a lot different from a field player.” Olivia also spoke about confidence in terms of its affect on her teammates. She emphasized, “You are the last person for your team to be the confidence booster that you’re there behind and to back them up. If the ball accidently gets behind there or something, you are there providing motivation behind them.” Similar to Gary and Olivia, Victor expressed confidence in his abilities to be the coach on the field for his team. He said, “I feel like I get to control the whole game. It is up to you to get your team settled and be calm, be in the right positions. It’s kind of like you are the coach, but on the field.” Although the participants ranged in their level of play (division I, II, & III) and positions, all of the participants outlined the importance of their mental approach in order to achieve success.

**Put yourself in my shoes.** Fourteen out of the 21 participants outlined that a unique factor in their specialized position was the lack of understanding from their teammates and coaches about what being a specialist entails. They talked about how this lack of understanding caused a lack of respect from teammates, coaches, and fans, some of their training to be inadequate, and the need for a specialist coach. Ethan passionately spoke about the lack of respect given to the kicker position. He specifically gave an example of when a kicker misses a kick and the media mocks the action. He said, “The next day of ESPN the guy is kicking that same field goal in dress shoes and stuff. Acting like it’s not that hard, but it’s a completely different scenario and they don’t understand it at all.” Similar to Gary, Henry felt that if

teammates had experienced or acquired knowledge on the position of the goalie their actions would change. He stated,

> I think goalkeeping is really apart from the skater positions. I would say that sometimes the lack of knowledge is a problem. Some players have a certain reaction after a play and they might not have the same reaction if they knew your position completely.

Gary discussed that another layer to the lack of respect or understanding is expressed as a lack of fitness or athleticism. He stated, "Some people have barely seen any soccer and doesn't know that the goalkeeper has to be just as fit as the other guys and even stronger. They think the goalkeeper is the guy that stands back and make saves." Will also discussed this stereotype that revolves around the specialist position due to a lack of understanding. He outlined,

> I could say it is probably one of the more interesting athletic movements if you will. So when people say that pitching isn't athletic, like one of our cheesy mottos is pitchers are athletes. So there is that statement that pitchers aren't really athletes and when you think about it, not everyone can throw a ball 90 miles an hour. It takes a lot of mobility and essentially athleticism to do so.

Irene also discussed the illusion from teammates that pitchers are not athletes. She posited,

> Everything we do in practice, they say pitcher are non-athletes, so because they say that we just want to do everything better. Everything we do, more energy, we set the tone for practice. We just want to be better than the position players.

***Lack of training and specialist coach***. This lack of understanding expands beyond just not respecting position specialists, but also providing them with inadequate and generalized training due to a lack of emphasis placed on the presence of a specialist coach. Out of the 21 participants, 11 of them had specialist position coaches, eight of those coaches being full-time

assistants, and three were volunteer or graduate assistant coaches. Eight of the 11 specialist coaches were at Division I institutions. Nancy explained the frustration she felt because of her lack of specialist coach by stating, “One of the hardest things that goalkeepers come across is having a coach that actually knows what he or she is doing. And trying to get good in that position (lacrosse goalie) is kinda hard because of that.” Mary expressed that without a coach she was not given proper training to prepare her for games and that her training was generalized to other field players (soccer). She detailed,

> We don't have a goalkeeper coach here, so I don't get any individualized training. It's not like they even tried to work with me or explain things to my teammates or me. We don't have a coach so what I do and practice is things that I want to work on, but no one is telling me how to fix my mistakes or anything like that. The worst part is, I train like a field player everyday, but I came here to be a goalkeeper.

Sarah revealed that her lack of training, reach beyond just physical, but also impacted her mental training that is crucial to her specialized position. She said,

> I think that's something that a lot of head and assistant coaches don't really understand, how to get the goalie to that point, to have that confidence. I think you can see that that. You can see that throughout the season with your goalies, like all the sudden it’s a confidence thing, statistically they have a bad game and will dip. I know as a goalie, you can see that confidence thing, but as a coach you just see ‘oh they had bad game and now they are not picking it up.’ They don't understand why goalies are asking or thinking the way they do. That’s why I think it's really important to have that goalie coach.

***Teammate coaches***. The lack of understanding reached beyond just a lack of a coach, but the idea that teammates or unqualified coaches were asked to fill the role. Olivia also talked

about how not having a specific specialist coach leaves a player or unqualified coach to fill in. She revealed, “So this year we just had someone to fill in to do drills with us and everything, but we haven't had a specific person goalie coach.” Like Olivia, Ethan also spoke about his fill-in coach, but emphasized that the responsibility fell on his fellow punter. He expressed, “I am the other punter on the team’s coach and he is my coach. If he is doing bad one day, I have to show him what he is doing wrong because the other coaches have no idea.” Irene emphasized that although her coach outlines her workouts, she still has a desire and need for a specialized pitching coach. She detailed,

> We do not have a pitching coach at our school. Our head coach does all of our drills as far as pitching and gives us the outline of what we would need to know. It is up to us to either go to our own pitching coaches or work on our own. It's not a bad system, but I would like to have a pitching coach on campus.

The participants talked very adamantly about the lack of respect and understanding given to their positions even though they make up a crucial element in each of their team sports. More specifically, they interpreted a lack of coaches as a lack of respect to them as specialists. They indicated that with this lack of understanding and respect also came the lack of resources given to a specialist coach and many times the training fell on himself or herself or other specialist to train properly.

**Positive team culture, leadership, and bond.** Despite the participants discussing a lack of understanding of their position and an elevated sense of pressure, 20 out of the 21 participants experienced positive team culture, leadership, or bond with their coaches and or teammates. Many of the participants discussed team culture as the togetherness. Derek highlighted this positive team culture saying, “It is always just a mix of people. I don't really see it like

everybody has their own cliques or anything. We have a positive team culture." Anna discussed that this was the first year during her career where the team was united. She said, "This year is the year where team is everybody hangs out with everybody off the field. Everyone talks. We go to dinner together." Jared detailed the positive team culture on his baseball team and discussed how they even had a nickname describing their unity. He stated,

> For the most part we try to do everything together. We have group meetings and will say let's go out and throw now. We call each other the squad, I don't know why. So we try to do everything together. We try to be really close together, we all are friends. We all go out together and stuff. Everybody is united together. There's not really an outlier.

For Kevin he could see the example of positive team culture most during games when all the players were involved in providing positive energy whether they were playing or not. He said, (When discussing the need for a big play in a big game) "The guys in the dugout try to get the energy going and just try to make something happen." The positive team culture was felt beyond just camaraderie and proximity with one another, the participants particularly talked about their close bond with other specialists. Travis explained the closeness he feels with other pitchers in comparison to position players. He stated,

> You get to be really close because you are around each other all day. You do develop relationships with position players after a while. But with pitchers, within the first week, you are pretty close, because everything you do, you do with them. We warm up as a team and then will split off. The pitchers will go do whatever we need to do for about an hour while position players do their drills. So, you develop relationships with the pitchers really quick because you are doing the same thing every day. You are all doing it together.

Although Derek indicated a positive team culture as a whole, he also specifically discussed that he has a closer relationship with the other specialists (kickers, punters, long snappers, and holders). He expressed,

> We are all very close like that is pretty much all we hang out with. If we are in the locker room, you will see that all the specialists are together. We go out to eat on Thursdays together. We are all good friends.

***Bond with other specialists***. For some of the participants it was more than just a bond or closeness, it was the support and understanding felt from other specialists that created a positive culture. Bethany explained the closeness felt by the pitchers on her team allowed them to pick up on each others emotions. She stated, "We know each other to where we can tell when each other is upset or having a bad day. You can see it through the pitching and everything." Sarah explained that her teammates provided motivation when she was struggling. She posited,

> When I'm having a bad drill, I look to my other goalies because they know what it's like. They understand when you are having a really bad drill or bad game or need to get pumped up a little bit. Usually that's whom I look to for support.

Nancy expressed this positive culture was felt with the other specialists on her team through the push and drive to improve as a group. She detailed,

> We just push each other really hard because we want to see the other one improve. It's shifted from competition to you're a good friend. You understand what I go through during practice and games too. We've definitely become a lot closer.

***Positive care from coaches***. Finally, the participants discussed that positive team culture was rooted in the relationship with their leadership or coaching staff. Olivia discussed her coach's ability to bond with all of the athletes on her team. She stated,

She has a good relationship with everyone on the team I feel like. A lot of other sports here at our school the athletes they are not really fond of their coaches. But none of my 22 girls really say anything negative about her. We all support her and she supports us.

Henry reflected on the importance of his relationship with his goaltender coach. He specifically, expressed the importance of his coach's goalie experience, knowledge, and ability to relate to his position. He said,

> It is great since we can interact with that person that has a great background about your specific position and movement. We can ask, or kind of like bounce off ideas about how to react to a certain situation, especially since he was a goaltender. So every situation that you are encountering is unique and unique to a goalie. Therefore having someone, in our case, our coach played goalie in ice hockey, so having their background, their background knowledge be the same position as you is something that is quite useful.

Kevin attributed the positive culture he felt on his team to not only his coach's support but also, care for him and his teammates as people. He expressed,

> I feel like he would do anything for us. Outside of baseball, if we need something he is always there for us. You can call him no matter what time he will do his best to help you out whether it's with baseball or personal issue. He's really good about making everybody close, just not here in baseball.

Victor echoed this sense of care when he described his coaches. He said, "I absolutely love them. They are like my best friends. On campus, they are like my parents. If anytime I need someone to talk to, I can talk to them." Gary specifically talked about how his coaches showed care during his injury when he was second-guessing his abilities. He stated, "My coaches told me they believed in me which was good to hear. They just wanted me to keep working hard to return."

Catherine particularly expressed this care and support through her coach's wiliness to work with them through the difficult struggles throughout the season. She explained, "Coach is very encouraging. If you sit and talk to him and tell I'm struggling, after practice he'll stay and hit ground balls extra, he'll throw a front toss. He wants everyone to do well. He cares 100%."

**Subtheme: When it's negative, it's toxic.** Although the majority of the participants indicated positive culture surrounding their team and teammates, seven of the participants also spoke about isolated incidents. Even though the goalies spoke of positive bond with their team, they also bonded in part due to their isolation. Quinn specifically talked about feelings of isolations revolving around being left out from the team. She explained,

> The three of us (goalies) miss out on that part of team bonding. We are not there passing and drilling with them. A lot of times when we play 7 on 7's the goalies will stand together, subbing in and out, the other plays stand on the others side of the field.

Anna echoed these feelings of being excluded. She said,

> Maybe from a soccer standpoint, when they are talking I don't always know all the things they are talking about. Or when they say, 'I can't believe coach said this'. I am like I wasn't there, so I don't know what you're talking about.

Ethan detailed the experience of exclusion, but from his coaches. He expressed,

> When we go in at halftime, all the kickers will sit by each other in the back left corner. They will talk to everyone else and tell them what they are doing wrong. That's it. They don't say anything to us.

Ethan gave another example of this isolation or lack of inclusion displayed by his coaching staff. He stated,

> (In regards to practice) No one is over here (at the practice field) to tell us when to go over there (to the main field). So coach has no idea, but we've missed many a times where we are walking over there and we see the field and we see them all huddled up and taking a knee, and turn around and act like we were never there. If we walked in late, I can't imagine what would happen.

Fred and Kevin particularly elaborated that their isolation was more extensive when they were recovering from injury and the coaches made them feel insignificant. Fred expressed,

> I didn't feel like I was part for the team being out so long. I couldn't participate in anything from running to lifting to throwing, so I definitely felt very isolated. And I got down for a while. It made me really upset I couldn't play anymore. In terms of the coaches, I'd been out so long I was so isolated from the team. I could never really deal with them I didn't talk to them much. Every time I pasted them, they'd ask me how I'm doing but other than that we had very little communication. It was mainly just showing up and mainly talking with the trainer full-time.

Similarly, Kevin felt irrelevant as a member of the team and to his coaching staff. He stated, "That was one of the main reasons why I transferred because I wasn't going to get to play because after I had surgery they kind of tossed me to the side."

**Sport is a family experience.** Eighteen out of the 21 participants discussed how sport was socialized through their family during their early childhood and adolescents and the importance of their continued support through the participants' college athletic careers. Many of the participants talked specifically about their family being their direct influence in why they started playing their sport. For example, Catherine detailed, "I had an older cousin. She is two years older than I am and she was playing softball. We are pretty close so I wanted to do that as

well and to be with her." Some of the participants credited their parents for their love of their chosen sport. Jared explained, "My dad got me a glove and I started throwing with him and falling in love with the sport." Rita particularly credited her mother and her stepfather as her driving forces to learn the sport and advance as a pitcher during her youth. She said,

> My mom was a big help to me because she played at a high Division I level and she knew what it would take physically and mentally for me to get there. She really pushed me and she did everything that she could to get me to where I said I wanted to go. My stepdad has coached several players that have gone and played at the college level. He knew what I needed to do mentally and physically to help get myself ready.

Bethany also talked about her mother played college softball and was a pitcher, so she followed in her mother and sister's footsteps. She stated,

> My mom played softball until college age and she got an athletic scholarship, but didn't take it. And then she taught my sister how to throw, how to pitch, how to play and what not. I was always at the games watching and I always thought it was the greatest thing and I couldn't wait until I could play. Because I would be practicing on the side and I wanted to play so when I turned seven my mom started working with me.

***Siblings as role models***. Other participants elaborated that their influence to play came from family, but specifically looking up to their siblings as their role models. Mary expressed looking up to her sister and how it influenced her desire to start playing. She said,

> My sister played soccer. She's 10 years older than me so I grew up watching her play. She was at a higher level. She was fifteen when I was five so I would see her play high school soccer. I thought it was really cool. She definitely influenced me to start playing.

Similar to Mary, Sarah wanted to emulate her brother and eventually became a soccer goalie. She explained,

> We have always been very close and he started playing hockey when he was nine. My dad kind of got him into it. I started it because of him. He was actually a goalie when he played and I always said I'm never going to be a goalie and then I ended up becoming one. I always looked up to him. He really got me into it.

Derek echoed the craving to play sports due to a wish to spend time with his siblings. He stated,

> I started playing soccer when I was five years old and because my parents put me in it. I started playing basketball when I was seven or eight and I wanted to play it because my brothers played and I wanted to do that with them.

Quinn described how in her family, she was the role model. She stated, "My little sister followed me as well. She plays lacrosse as well. She actually plays with me at my school."

***Continued support from family***. Not only did the participants discuss the influence of their families to participate in sport, but emphasized the continued support they received as they continued to play during their adolescents and in college. Catherine specifically spoke about her father's wiliness to assist her in her training and how it lead to her work ethic in college. She stated,

> I was very lucky that my dad would catch me every single day. He would push me. I would pitch every single day and at 10 years old. Hardly anybody else on the team would go out and pick up a softball every single day. But I was lucky that I did have that support system. I did have someone (dad) to push me and to become better, which created that lifestyle.

Irene expressed that although her mother didn't have any softball experience, she provided her reinforcement and validation in her ability throughout her youth and adolescent career. She said,

> My mom knew nothing about the game of softball when I really got serious in it. She always supported me even through the hard times. She believed I could do anything. Even though she didn't have that sport connection, she always wanted me to do whatever I wanted to do.

Travis specifically outlined how even in college his family provides him with love and support. He expressed,

> I get a ton of support. There is no lack of that and it does help because especially in the spring, you are there. You don't go home. Don't have any breaks. Don't have spring break. That makes the season long, helps a lot to have your family there every now and then.

Finally, Gary explained that his support system began as a child and has continued to be present in his current college career. He said,

> My biggest impact would have been my parents. They definitely kept me motivated throughout the years from when I was a little kid until now. Now still when I'm college, they will call me almost every other day to see how my practices are going, if I'm happy, how I'm doing. They just know how to support me really well. They have done that for the last 5 to 6 years. It's been very important to me. The support system is still there.

In spite of the pressure, stress, and lack of understanding that the participants felt through their specialized position, majority of the participants indicated that their family provided a strong foundation of love, support, and contributed to their involvement in sport today.

**Sport is foundational in my life.** All of the participants expressed how influential sport had been and currently was in their lives. The participants explained that sport had taught them life lessons, was a significant part of their identity, and there was anxiety or excitement surrounding the transition away from their particular sport. First, some of the participants expressed that they had been taught how to develop relationships and work with others through sport. Rita and Sarah attributed the life lesson of learning to work with a diverse group to their sporting experience. Rita said, "Softball teaches me life lessons. I've learned so much about how to work with people, and how to work through adversity in a way that you can't warrant any other way." Sarah reiterated this stating, I think it's definitely taught so many lessons, especially with teammates and being able to work with anybody and everybody and knowing that there are a lot of different backgrounds and different personalities.

Kevin explained that sport provided him a connection and ability to create friendships. He said, "Sport for me it's a connection. I'm with my friends' everyday. I'm closer to them than I am my high school friends or any other kind of friends." Fred echoed the importance of his friendships with his baseball teammates, saying, It (the sport of baseball) has done a lot for me. It's made me have great relationships, great coaches, great friends that I will be lifetime friends with. It's been a huge chunk of my life. Victor, liked Fred and Kevin talked about how soccer has allowed him to develop friendships. He stated,

> Soccer has meant a whole lot. It's definitely taught me some life lessons like when I first started to now. I've made a lot of good friends, met a lot of cool people. Soccer is just an awesome sport and brings people together which I love.

Finally, Nancy explained that for her lacrosse provided a positive atmosphere and chance for bonds with friends to solidify almost like family. She expressed, "So playing lacrosse that was

kind of like my first family. All the girls were so close and so accepting of everyone and I love the atmosphere of it."

***Lessons learned from sport***. Next, some of the participants discussed the attributes that they had learned through sport that would transfer to other areas of their lives. Catherine specifically spoke about sport teaching her more than the fundamentals of the game. She described this saying,

> I think softball has been a huge part of my life. I've learned a lot from it as well, not just the wins and losses and everything to do with the sport. I've learned life lessons. I think I'm going to take everything that I've learned and everything softball has given to me and kind of divert into a new path.

Sarah expounded that hockey and the position of goalie taught her how to deal with pressure and criticism and that those lessons would be applicable throughout the rest of her life. She stated,

> But I think it's (hockey) taught so much and especially as a goalie. It teaches a lot about how to deal with failure. You have pressure and criticism that we did discuss earlier, all those things, it teaches you how to deal with that. I think that's a skill that you wouldn't necessarily have without it. I know that is going to help me along later in life.

Kevin explained that sport for him was an escape and a way to let go of stresses. He expressed,

> Baseball is kind of like a getaway. You don't worry about anything whenever you're playing for those three or four hours. You don't think about anything you're just having fun and doing what you love to do and it just comes natural. You don't think about all the other personal problems, school or anything like that. You just go out and play. It's like a personal getaway. You can get away from everything and not have to think about anything except for what you doing right there.

Fred and Henry particularly spoke about how their sports provided them discipline that would be essential when they moved into their careers. Fred expressed, “I think baseball kept me out of trouble. It made me a better man. It taught me discipline and how hard you need to work if you want something. I can relate that to life or future job.”

Henry explained that being a student-athlete and be required to multi-task in different environments is preparing him for life after sport. He stated,

> The discipline that of sport at a college level mixed with school it will only bring you a benefit, you have to take care of your body, you have to take care of your mind, you have to take care of your business, the school parts as well. I think it brings a discipline. Especially with school that I do full time and with hockey if you take in all the preparation that goes into it, it is more than a full time job.

***Sport shaped who I am***. Not only did the participants identify that sport played a role in teaching them lessons that would be applicable for life, but also that sport shaped who they were as individuals. Ethan simply stated that he identified with his position on his football team directly. He said, “My identify is definitely kicker/punter. If someone asks if I’m on the football team, I immediately say I’m a kicker or punter.” Rita passionately spoke of her love for softball and how it has shaped her as a person saying, “It’s the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. I don't know where I would be in my life, I'd be a completely different person if I'd never picked up a ball.” Irene also credited softball with creating the person she is today. She said, “It's always been a huge part of my life. I can't imagine growing up and being the same person that I am today without it.” Similar to Irene, Nancy and Jared discussed the link between sport and their identity. Nancy detailed, “I've been playing for so long that it's almost become a part of me.” Jared also spoke about the love of baseball and how it has become a part of who he is. He

posited, “Oh man, baseball has always been a part of me. If you say Jared, they know that I play baseball. That's what I've always done my whole life. It's like my love. It means a great deal to me.”

***Transition out of sport***. Lastly, because the participants discussed earlier that sport had been influential in their lives, they had mixed emotions about leaving sport behind once their college athletic careers were over. Anna verbalized the feelings of giving up her identity as a soccer player and discussed the unknown of where to find the same feelings she received from sport. She said,

> I feel like that’s just like who I’ve always been - Anna the soccer player. Now it’s like I can’t really say that anymore, the used to be soccer player. I think that it will be hard. The feeling like in a game under the lights, all the fans and they are proud of me, that feeling of just like let’s go! Then you make a great save and it’s like ‘yeah’. I don’t know, it’s going to be a feeling that I really don’t know where else you get it. But, it’s going to be hard.

Bethany, although only a sophomore, also discussed that the pending transition out of college softball and pitching caused some uncertainty and discomfort. She stated, “I’m kinda nervous about it. Because last year when we lost out, I thought my life was over because I was like we don’t have softball for three months. What am I going to do? There is nothing.” Fred also verbalized this difficulty leaving baseball saying, “I think that it’s always gonna be a big part of my life. I think it would be very difficult to finally not play baseball anymore.” Quinn explained that for her lacrosse provided her with a stress relief and was worried about what would fill that role once she stopped playing lacrosse. She expressed, “I’m definitely going to be a lot more

emotional because the sport means a lot to me. It's a stress release. So it's, how am I going to relieve stress when I can't play anymore."

Despite the uncertainty and nerves that accompany leaving sport, many of the participants had accepting attitudes or were even excited for new opportunities in or out of their sporting atmosphere. Travis discussed the small reality of a professional baseball career after his intercollegiate baseball career ended. He said,

> I think you have to realize that it's such a small percentage that plays after school and you have to realize that you're going to be in that percentage. I have realized that I am not, just because you have to be throwing 90 or above. If you don't throw at least 90 mph you are not going to get picked up anywhere. I am not doing that, so pretty much all my thoughts after baseball have been about career path. I have accepted at this point, in 3 years or when I'm done playing, that's going to be it.

Jared acknowledged the short span of his intercollegiate sport careers, but turned his focus to enjoying baseball in the present moment. He stated,

> I know that baseball doesn't last forever. I wish it did, but there's a day and a time where you have to hang up your cleats and grow up. So definitely, I have to be ready for that. But I'm enjoying it as long as I can.

Quinn and Rita explained that acceptance of sport ending was inevitable, but appreciation for the opportunity was key. Quinn posited, "Graduating and thinking about leaving makes me a lot more grateful for the chance to play at the intercollegiate level." Rita echoed this grateful attitude stating,

> I'm going to hold onto it as long as I can and give it everything I have. I don't have much longer with it. My time playing is limited. I'm not going to be playing forever. Being out

> (injured) was a blessing to me in that way because it made me understand that I'm not always going to be a softball player. It's going to be in my past at some point. I can't go back so I have to take every day like it's precious and give it my all.

Many of the participants not only expressed the acceptance of a transition, but also embraced the chance to move into a new passion. Catherine outlined that moving on to graduate school made her excited for the future. She stated, "I am excited for the future, like I said I'm trying to get into pharmacy school. That's looking good. I am excited for some new things, new changes." Sarah also detailed her enthusiasm to begin her career and attend graduate school. She said,

> As you start to find those new passions, I've always known I don't have a career in hockey. It's not an option for women, so you always know that you are going to school first and have a career. Once I got a taste of that with the internship, I started to get excited about that. The more I think about it, the more I'm ready to move on to grad school. I'm ready to have a career, I really excited about that.

A few of the participants held a desire to channel their playing experience and passion for their sport into coaching. Travis explained, "As far as coaching on the side, I definitely want to do that. I want to stay in the game because I still love it. At some point, I would definitely like to be an assistant coach or head coach." Kevin also articulated the wish to coach at some point in the future. He said, "I talked to my coach and I'm trying to play professionally after this year. If it doesn't work out then I'd like to stay in baseball. I would like to get a college coaching job like a pitching coach." Gary more specifically summarized that he wanted to make an impact in the area of youth soccer by providing proper physical and mental training for young children. He stated,

> I want to be a coach right after college and develop younger kids because it's important for this country to develop them at a younger age and teach them how to play the right kind of soccer and the right mentality of the young kids.

Mary also reiterated a desire to influence the sport of soccer and the community of sport in a positive manner through a career in physical therapy caring for athletes and coaching. She expressed,

> I want to go into physical therapy school and become a physical therapist. I think that all kind of stems from soccer because I like being around sports medicine side of things. Soccer influenced what I want to do in the future. I do hope to be some sort of coach whether it's a travel team coach or a goalkeeper coach. That's always been a goal of mine.

All of the participants discussed that sport was a foundational piece in their lives. Many of the participants focused on the teaching tool sport was for transferrable life lesson such as diversity, discipline, and overcoming obstacles. Several of the participants acknowledged that sport had become part of their identity as an individual. Some of the participants recognized the possible struggle or uncertainty that could be encountered when sport ceased, but various other participants explained the unique opportunity to move into a new field or expand the sports field they were already in through coaching.

# CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to discover, describe, and understand the experiences of position specialist in a team sport environment. It is evident through the findings in the study that position specialists possess unique experiences in their team sport environment compared to their teammates. Distinctive findings from this study were: diversification of sport during youth and adolescents, specialization was used as a tool to advance to the next level, psychological factors were perceived as used more frequently and intensely than teammates, and the importance of support.

In support of the sport sampling literature, the majority of the participants (15) in the study discussed playing multiple sports during their youth and adolescent careers. This finding could have implications and add to the body of literature that sport diversification or sport sampling has further athleticism, enjoyment, motivation, and social benefits for athletes than early specialization (Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Côté, 1999; Wiersma, 2000; Wright & Côté, 2003). It is interesting to note that some of the participants identified in support of the second research question (What contexts or situations have impacted or influenced your experiences of position specialization?) that their position specialization occurred as accidental or through a chance to rotate into the position at a young age. Again, this could support the benefits of sport diversification by allowing youth athletes to learn multiple positions in the sport, exposure to new experiences, and create more opportunities for learning the game and increasing enjoyment.

However, despite the number of participants that experienced sport diversification, a number of the participants in the study attributed sport specialization, and more specifically, position specialization to their ascension to intercollegiate athletics. This finding again supports

the second research question or provides the context for why the participants specialized in their position. Despite the sport psychology literature that does not supports a direct correlation between specialization and elite sport (intercollegiate, Olympic, or professional), the participants understood their specialization as the pathway to receiving a college scholarship and receiving the opportunity to play at the next level (Bompa, 1995; Gould, 2010).

Although this study cannot generalize the factors uncovered to all position specialists, it does contribute to the body of sport psychology literature and provide a foundation for concepts that should be further explored. In particular and in support of the first research question (What are the lived-experiences of position specialists in a team sport environment?), participants explained that they felt their mental approach to the their sport, qualities of resiliency, mental toughness, and the need for confidence were felt in greater capacity and were unique attributes to the experiences of being a position specialist. Research has supported that mental toughness and resiliency are two psychological skills possessed by elite athletes (Bull et al., 2005; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Galli & Vealey, 2008; Jones et al., 2002, 2007). Furthermore, research has discovered that mental toughness, confidence, and resiliency are not singular traits that elite athletes possess, but instead that elite athletes and performers possess a multi-dimensional and fluid approach to all three characteristics (Harmison, 2011).

Specifically, this multi-dimensional approach to mental toughness takes into account that elite athletes are not only confident in their abilities, but also desire to be the one that makes the difference in a game (Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2008; Harmison, 2011; Jones et al., 2002, 2007). The participants discussed that the characteristic of confidence was needed to play a specialized position, but Rita, Jared, and Tyler specifically detailed the desire to enter the game during pressure situations and their faith in their ability to

succeed in the high pressure situations. Next, in the mental toughness mutli-dimensional approach, athletes bounce back from setbacks with greater determination, persevere in face of obstacles, and learn from their failures (Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Gucciardi et al., 2008; Harmison, 2011; Jones et al., 2002, 2007). Participants outlined the "next play" mentality describing that in their specialized position the ability to move on from a mistake or failure and remain positive allowed personal and team success. Also emphasized in the multi-dimensional approach to mental toughness are the attributes of managing pressure, anxiety, and emotion, thriving on these feelings, and being able to focus and think clearly in the present moment (Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Gucciardi, et al., 2008; Harmison, 2011; Jones et al., 2002, 2007). Again in support of the first research question, the participants expressed that the frequency and intensity of pressure was different for their positions. They viewed their position as more unforgiving or was viewed to directly correlated with scores or loses. However, they also explained a desire to perform at a high level for themselves and their team despite these pressures.

The last unique finding to this study was the presence of family and coaching staff support, but also the opportunity for coaches to demonstrate further relatedness to position specialists. First, participants discussed the importance of family support through their explanation of introduction to support occurring through family and that continued support during their college athletic career provided motivation and care. Research has found family support to be an influential factor in youth activity and sport.

Eime et al. (2013) found a positive correlation between parental support (travel, encouragement, playing with their girls, watching, and praising their involvement in sport and physical activity) and club membership in their study of adolescent girls access and support of

physical activity through sport club membership. Research on amateur tennis players found that children who felt their parents supported their involvement in tennis felt a higher sense of enjoyment, performance, and self-esteem (Hoyle & Leff, 1997). A study conducted on 57 girls and boys involved in youth tennis, found the children preferred when their parents displayed supportive behavior such as: "attentive silence, cheering, encouragement, praise, empathy, and protective intervention" (Omli & Weise-Bjornstal, 2011, p. 704). Encouraging parental support was also echoed in a study on nine elite youth tennis players between the ages of 16-24. The participants' noted parental support in terms of "providing transportation, giving emotional support, setting tournament schedules, and making the sacrifice for the child to have the opportunity to play" (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Piece, 2010). This study and the indication from participants of the importance family played in contributing to their pursuit of sport and continued participation in the sport could add to the body of literature.

Secondly, in support of the second and third research question (How has the occurrence of position specialization affected your experience of team culture/ team dynamics?) the participants expressed that support from coaches was important to their experiences as position specialists. Participants detailed that coaches displayed positive leadership and team culture when they demonstrated care for the athletes as individuals, not just athletes. Research has also been found to support the importance of care in the coach-athlete relationship (Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005; Kernis, 2003; Mageau & Vallerand 2003; Murray, Mann, & Mead, 2010).

Specifically, sport psychology research has highlighted the importance of fulfilling the basic psychological needs of athletes: competence or the need for the athlete to view their behavior as effective in a situation, autonomy or the need to perceive actions are accordance with

values and freedom, and relatedness or the need to feel securely connected to and understood by others (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Mageau and Vallerand (2003) explained that this autonomous support extends beyond acknowledging the thoughts of the athlete, but that the coach provides the athlete with levels of control and choice. Research has found that when athletes receive autonomous support there is a positive correlation between their satisfaction, self-determination and motivation (Hagger, Chatzisartantis, Culverhouse, & Biddle, 2003; Wilson & Rodgers, 2004). Alcarez, Torregrosa, and Viladrich (2015) found in their study of 302 club and sports coaches that in order for coaches to obtain a positive psychological well-being relationship with their teams that they must demonstrate relatedness, a respect of the basic psychological needs of their athletes, and a lack of psychological needs thwarting or ignoring the basic needs of the athletes causing inefficiency and negative psychological repercussions.

In this study some of the athletes discussed that their coaches allowed them to create and implement their own workouts causing them levels of autonomy. However, this autonomous support was also met with challenge and the issue that the coaches plans were unfit for their specialized position or could not express relatedness or understanding of their specialized position. Many of the participants discussed that their coaches and even teammates did not understand what their specialized position entailed and because of this workouts and practices weren't always efficient and productive. Despite, some of the participants indicating a lack of relatedness when it comes to respect and understanding of their specialized position, they also explained that the care their coaches provided for them as individuals provided them with connection, support, and involvement.

**Applying Social Identity Theory**. A key factor to Social Identity Theory is the idea of stress and support appraisal. This appraisal demonstrates that stress or pressure can be evaluated as threatening to the self and the group or that stress can be viewed as an opportunity to unite (Freeman & Rees, 2009). The participants in the study reinforced the concepts of stress and support appraisals through their explanation of pressure, blame, and glory. Position specialists were members of the "in" group when their play allowed for saves, wins, or big plays. However, when the specialists' experienced failure or made a mistake, they became members of the "out" group within their own team due to the lack of ability of position players to share in their experience. The movement between "in" and "out" groups is situational and based primarily on performance. Particularly, this movement between "in" and "out" groups can shape position specialists experiences to only feel valued when their performances are high and success is occurring causing a lack of overall positive team culture.

Furthermore, Social Identity Theory explains that as humans and group members, individuals self-categorize based on their perceived shared experiences. Thus, for many of the position specialists the pressure, spotlight, and failure caused a lack of shared experience with their teammates placing them in the "out" group. In addition to pressure, the focus on the mental game also created an "out" group experience for position specialists. The specialists acknowledged that a mental approach, confidence, toughness, and resiliency were not exclusive traits to a specialist, but that the frequency at which these traits needed to be applied during competition was much higher than their teammates.

We can see how social identity theory applies to this group of position specialists through its ability to explain how leaders can be effective. Rees et al. (2015) stated that "core claims of the social identity approach is that leadership is not as commonly supposed, a property that

resides in a person's character as an individual, but rather one that results from a leader's capacity to embody what a particular group means to its members in any given context" (p. 1090). Thus, if a coach is able to connect with a player through the lens of how that group identifies itself, they have a much greater chance at being a good leader of that group. This is outlined through the participants expressed frustration with a lack of position specialist coaches and training, but also the identification of a strong bond with their coaching staff.

Participants detailed that they were members of the "out" group by their coaches and teammates lack of understanding for what their position entailed and their desire for more specific training from a specialist coach who had similar backgrounds to their own. However, they also indicated "in" group membership and saw value in their coaches' leadership when the coaches expressed care and concern for them as people. Thus, the characteristics of empathy, concern, and care allowed the coaches to display "in" group leadership and when they coaches could not verbalize understanding, respect, or the ability to view group dynamics through the lens of the specialists, their leadership was perceived as inefficient, and left the specialists with feelings of isolation.

**Implications for sport psychology consultants and sport managers.** There are many implications for sport psychology consultants, coaches, and sport managers from this study. First, there are opportunities for sport psychology consultants to work with coaches and teams to create more team cohesion and understanding across positions. In order to enhance team cohesion or the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of a common goal, group and role assignments must be understood. Role assignment is important to team culture and cohesion due it its ability to outline each individual's responsibility, job, and contribution to the group (Carron, et al., 2007; Eys, et al., 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2010). The

participants in this study discussed that they understood their role on the team, but felt their coaches and teammates did not have the same understanding or role clarity of what the specialists contributed to the team and experiences they went through in their specialized position.

Sport psychology consultants could enact activities where players from different groups simulate or practice a position uniquely different than their own to create an atmosphere of learning, respect, and understanding for these distinct differences. Team cohesion could also be strengthened through the environmental factor of proximity (Carron, Shapcott, & Burke, 2007). If teammates were encouraged to spend more time together outside of their sporting environment, then a stronger bond could develop. For example, team dinners, switching up room assignments on the road, or having a mix between specialists and other teammates during warm ups. Sport psychology consultants could have an impact on position specialists by engaging them in specific mental training to enhance their strategies for mental toughness, resiliency, and confidence through goal-setting, visualization, and imagery.

Although some of the participants indicated that they had a specific specialist coach for their training, some of the participants also expressed that their lack of specialist coach left them feeling isolated and unprepared for play. Although funding is always an issue on athletic teams, coaches should target to hire specialists coaches that can provide specific drills, training, workouts, and preparation for game play, but also relatedness with the position specialists that cannot be provided by other coaching staff members. Training is not exclusive to just the mental skills, physical skills, but also education on transition and athletic identity should be prioritized. It is important for athletes to receive information early in their athletic career about the problems that could occur with an athletic only focused identity and the possible negative transitional

issues that can occur. Having a strong athletic identity and the process of leaving sport can cause harmful effects physically, mentally, and emotionally.

This sense of loss can often be accompanied by psychological issues like: feeling out of control, sense of helplessness, mood swings, depression, anxiety, and even in some extreme cases thoughts of suicide (Lally, 2007). This loss can even cause physical problems such as loss of appetite, weight fluctuation, and insomnia (Blinde & Stratta, 1993). Another factor that can influence the transition process is the friend group or support system of the athlete. Many athletes only developed relationships with their teammates because of their restrictive schedules; which greatly affected their identity development (Shofner, & Shurts, 2004). A loss of identity for some athletes when transitioning out of sport can ultimately leave that athlete spiraling and could leave the athlete with an inability to move to the next stage of their life.

The participants in this study did not indicate extreme physical or psychological issues revolving around an upcoming transition, but instead indicated uncertainty and feelings of being unprepared. In support of the literature, many of the participants in this study indicated hope for their transition due to opportunities to pursue new passions, move to graduate schools or internships, and the possibilities of coaching in the future (Boixandos, Cruz, Judge, & Torregrosa, 2004).

Finally, this study has strong implications for organizational culture, coaches, and sport managers. If coaches, sport managers, and athletic administrators have a better understanding of how position specialists' function, they are able to comprehend how to build organizations around them and enhance opportunity for success. At a macro level, sports organizations must create high organizational behavior and culture through a congruency between what the organization believes and how the organization behaves. This congruent organizational culture

must extend to all members to provide them with perceived value and stock in the organization. At the micro level or team level, a common purpose, common approach, set team developed performance goals and mutual accountability or shared responsibility can create an environment for an effective and successful team (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). The key to a successful organizational culture is recognition of the value each individual brings, how it relates to the overall goals of the group as a whole, and ways to create inclusion and collaboration for all the members (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003).

**Limitations.** Although this study provided detail to the phenomena surrounding position specialists, it is not without limitations. First, this study was conducted qualitatively to discover the unique lived-experiences of the participants. Having stated this, it could be seen as a limitation that the study did not directly compare position specialists to non-position specialists. Secondly, the study's population of current student-athletes raised several issues. The study used sports information directors to engage and locate possible participants. Given the role of the sports information directors to protect the athletes from media, many possible participants did not receive the study's informational email.

Due to the busy schedules and time commitments of student-athletes, many possible student-athlete participants agreed to participate in the study, but did not complete the interview. Also, asking for an hour or over of the student-athlete's time was not possible. The request for interviews was condensed down to 30-45 minutes. Also due to the schedules and time commitments of student-athletes, in person interviews were scarce. Only four out of the 21 interviews were conducted in-person. This could be seen as a limitation because in-person interviews allow the researcher to note body, facial, and non-verbal cues and develop rapport with more ease. The subject matter might have also caused limitations. When asking questions

about team culture, some of the participants seemed hesitant to discuss the subject matter. More than one participant asked about the anonymity of the study and if the information would get back to their coaches.

Lastly, the study did not include a highly diverse population. Only two participants from division II institutions were used. Next, since the data collection took place in the fall, the researcher struggled to receive information from football kickers and punters. It could be seen as a limitation that only two punters participated in this study. The study also only had three non-Caucasian participants, so racial diversity was missing from this study. It is important to explore how ethnic minorities experiences differ being on a team that is predominantly Caucasian or vice versa.

**Future Research.** Based on the limitations of this study, future research should focus on a study that enrolls both position specialists to their non-specialists peers in order to have a direct comparison of their experiences. To get a better understanding on the phenomenon on a larger scale, a survey could be sent to all position specialists across the NCAA divisions. Future research should also explore the experiences of retired or graduated position specialists; this population could be more inclined to participate and engage in discussion more openly without worry of repercussions. Lastly, future research should not only focus on expanding the area of research by continuing to explore the existence of the phenomenon, but also explore the ways to enhance the experiences of this unique population.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion this research sheds light that a phenomenon is experienced revolving around athletes not only specializing in a sport, but also in a position. Position specialists indicated that their position within their team sport environment includes multiple factors that are not shared with their teammates such as the highly individualized training, mental

approach, pressure and stress of their position, and the lack of understanding of what their role/position demands. Despite these differences, position specialists also acknowledged the importance of having a positive team culture, bond with coaches and teammates, support from family, and explained the significance of sport in their lives. Based on these findings, it is necessary for coaches, sport psychology consultants, and sport administrators to create an inclusive culture. These findings can add to the body of literature on sport specialization to include position specialists and provide administrators and coaches valuable training and information about how position specialists think, act, and reason with their identity within their team environment.

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# APPENDICES

*Appendix 1*

**Proposal Handout**

The Lived-experiences of Position Specialists in a Team Sport Environment

Allison Smith, M.A.

University of Tennessee

September 12, 2016

**Purpose Statement:**

This study seeks to uncover the experiences of a specific population within collegiate sport: position specialists in a team sport environment.

**Topic Relevance:**

- Limited research on position specialization and the players who specialize in a specific position within a team sport environment.
- Provide a definition for position specialization
- Implications and suggestions could be made to create a more inclusive environment for these student-athletes, sport management, & HR

**Research Questions:**

RQ1: What are the lived-experiences of position specialists in a team sport environment?

RQ2: What contexts or situations have impacted or influenced your experiences of position specialization?

RQ3: How has the occurrence of position specialization affected your experience of team culture?

**Sampling:**

- Purposive or specific criterion sampling
- Participants have to be members of a team sport and play a specialized position within that team sport such as pitcher, kicker, punter, quarterback, or goalie.
- Division I and Power 5 institutions
- Age Range: 18-24

- 10-20 position specialists in the sample

**Methods:**

- Phenomenological in approach; focused on lived-experiences
- Interviews will be used
- Constant comparison analysis

*Appendix 2*

**Proposal Preliminary Interview Guide**

| **Questions** |
| --- |
| 1. 1. Describe how you began playing your sport. What or who were your influences? |
| 2. Did you play other sports growing up? When did you cease playing those sports? |
| 3. At what age did you begin the recruiting process? |
| 4. Explain the process of narrowing your college choice. Why did your choose your current institution? |
| 5. Did you experience a narrowing into one position? If so, discuss that process. |
| 6. If I was going to categorize someone as specializing in a position, what makes that experience unique compared to your teammates? |
| 7. Describe your relationships with your coaches, teammates, and administrators when you first arrived to the team. Describe that relationship now. Has it changed? If so, why? |
| 8. How does that relationship influence your experience? |
| 9. Is there one person you really identify with? If so, what does that relationship mean to you? |
| 10. Explain what team culture is. What is the culture of your team? (i.e.., leadership, inclusion, exclusion) |
| 11. What is the leadership like on of your team (coaches or teammates)? |
| 12. What is a typical day of practice like for you? |
| 13. What is a typical pre-game warm up like for you? |

14. What is a typical post-game interaction like for you?
15. Due to your position do you have more interactions with a certain coach(es)? If so, describe those interactions.
16. Due to your position do you have more interactions with certain teammates over others? If so, explain these interactions.
17. Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

*Appendix 3*

## IRB Study Approval Letter


Exp211 Rev Approval (No Provisos)
November 30, 2016

Allison Brooke Smith,
UTK - Kinesiology Recreation & Sport Studies

**Re: UTK IRB-16-03236-XP**
**Study Title:** The Lived Experiences of Position Players in a Team Sport Environment

Dear Dr. Smith:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for **revision** of your previously approved project, referenced above.

The IRB determined that your application is eligible for **expedited** review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(2). The following revisions were approved as complying with proper consideration of the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects:

- Revise participant pool to include all NCAA Divisions and conferences.

Approval does not alter the expiration date of this project, which is 09/21/2017.

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB. Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, **re-approval** of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,

Colleen P. Gilrane

**Colleen P. Gilrane, Ph.D.**
Chair

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax irb.utk.edu

*Appendix 4*

**Informed Consent**

**Informed Consent to Participate in Research**

The lived-experiences of a specialized position player in a team sport environment

**Introduction**

You are invited to participate in this research study which purpose is to examine the experiences of being a specialized position player, position specialization, and team culture.

**Participants' Involvement in the Study**

You will be asked to fill out a demographic information sheet that asks for information such as age, sex, year in school, institution, and sport experience. You will be participating in an approximately 30-45 minute interview and will be asked a series of questions focused on your experiences as a specialized position player in a team sport environment. The interviews will be digitally recorded on an audio recorder to ensure accuracy of your responses. After the interviews are completed and transcribed the researcher will ask you to review the document for accuracy and any follow-up thoughts.

**Risks**

There are minimal risks involved in the research. It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but due to the procedures used to minimize this risk, the investigator believes this risk is very low. You may be asked to recall experiences that could be considered negative in nature and that may cause stress and discomfort. Your name(s) and affiliations will remain confidential. Themes will be reported only in groups. You will be assigned a pseudonym, and that will be used for any direct quotation used. The consent for each interview will be stored separately from the interview responses. You may withdraw orally during the interview or by phone, or via email or letter to the researcher.

The researcher will have access to all notes, transcripts and recordings. This information will be kept on a flash drive, which will be either in the researcher's personal possession, or under lock and key in a secure location. The recordings will be deleted from the digital recorder as soon as they are downloaded onto the flash drive. The computer used to open the flash drive will be password protected, and kept under lock and key in the researcher's office. The informed consent forms and verbal consent voice files will be kept separate from the transcripts and recordings. The signed consent forms will be under lock and key in a secure location. All of your information (i.e., recordings, transcripts, forms) will be destroyed by the researchers three years after the study is completed in compliance with IRB regulations.

_____ (Place your initials here)

**Benefits**

There are no anticipated direct benefits to you resulting from your participation in the research. The primary benefit of participating in this research study is to provide greater insight into the experiences of being a specialized position player. Very little literature exists on the idea of position specialization, its process, and how it affects team culture in a team sport environment. The researcher hopes to shed light on this phenomenon.

**Confidentiality**

Every attempt will be made to keep the information in this study confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons involved the study unless participants specifically give permission to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link participants to the study. Pseudonyms will be used in all references to the participants.

**Contact Information**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact Allison Smith, the active researcher, at the University of Tennessee in the Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport Studies, 1914 Andy Holt Ave., Knoxville, TN 37996, or by telephone at (865) 974-1281 or email at asmit308@vols.utk.edu or Dr. Rob Hardin, the researcher's faculty advisor and dissertation committee chair, at the University of Tennessee in the Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport Studies, 1914 Andy Holt Ave. Knoxville, TN 37996, or by telephone at (865) 974-1281, or by email at robh@utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance at 1534 White Ave., Knoxville, TN 37996-1529 or by telephone at (865)-974-7697, or email at utkirb.utk.edu.

**Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

**Consent**

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study. I have been given the ability to ask questions at any time prior, during or after the study. I understand my participation is completely voluntary. I may withdraw at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I give my permission for Allison Smith to use the interview and information collected for her research.

_____

Print Name of Participant

_____

Signature of Participant/ Date

_____

Investigator Signature/ Date

*Appendix 5*

**IRB Approved Email to Sports Information Directors (SIDs)**

Email to Sports Information Directors:

(Date)

Dear (Insert Name),

I am a current PhD student at the University of Tennessee working towards completion of my dissertation. I am interesting in talking to collegiate student-athletes who specialized in their position about their experiences with position specialization and their team culture. I am reaching out to you since you are listed as the sports information director for (Insert Sport). I would like to inquire about possible participants: upperclassmen that are specialists (those that only play a singular position) on the team (i.e., pitchers, quarterbacks, goalies, kickers, punters, etc.).

Participants would be asked to participate in a roughly 30 minute interview in person and/or over the phone. Before the interview takes place they will be required to sign an informed consent explaining they know the purpose, risks, and their rights as a participant in the study as well as a demographic questionnaire.

If you feel you have student-athletes that would be willing to be a participant, could you please forward along this email or email me back their contact information.

Thank you for your assistance with my research,

Allison Smith

University of Tennessee Doctoral Student in Kinesiology and Sport Studies

Asmit308@vols.utk.edu

865-974-1281

*Appendix 6*

**IRB Approved Email to Student-Athletes**

Information for Potential Participant Student-Athlete:

I am a current PhD student at the University of Tennessee working towards completion of my dissertation. I am interesting in talking to collegiate student-athletes who specialized in their position about their experiences with position specialization and their team culture. I am reaching out to you since your (Insert Sport) sports information director indicated you could be a possible participant. I am specifically looking for participants who are: upperclassmen that are specialists (those that only play a singular position) on the team (i.e., pitchers, quarterbacks, goalies, kickers, punters, etc.).

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in a roughly 30 minute interview in person and/or over the phone. Before the interview takes place you will be required to sign an informed consent explaining the study's purpose, risks, and your rights as a participant as well as a demographic questionnaire.

If you are interested in being a participant for my study, please email me back at asmit308@vols.utk.edu to set up a date, time, and location for our interview.

Thank you for your assistance with my research,

Allison Smith

University of Tennessee Doctoral Student in Kinesiology and Sport Studies

Asmit308@vols.utk.edu

865-974-1281

*Appendix 7*

**Demographic Questionnaire**

The lived-experiences of specialized position players in a team sport environment

## Demographic Questions

Age:

Institution:

Year/Class in School:

Academic Major (and/or minor):

Race/Ethnicity:

Sexual orientation:

Relationship status:

Sport:

Position:

Age you specialized in your sport:

Age you specialized in your position:

Awarded an athletic scholarship for your sport and percentage of award:

*Appendix 8*

**Example of the Coding Process**

| Theme | Major Categories | Example Quote |
|---|---|---|
| Stepping up and standing out | Training is highly individualized, Sampling vs. specialization, Sport at a young age, accidental opportunity | *The way we practice, what we practice, the amount of running, or the type of lifts we do. Just every aspect is different. Anything we do is always separated from the rest of the guys. It's a different workout, practice, and conditioning.* |
| All pressure, no forgiveness | Elevated pressure unique to specialists, Control/pace of the game, Directional/vocal leader | *You only get so many opportunities. I would only get so many plays out there. So if I mess up on one punt, whose is to say I get another one the rest of the game?* |
| It's all about the mental game | Mental focus, Next play, Mental toughness, Confidence in abilities | *At least when I am on the mound, I try to after every pitch reset, refocus, and focus on the next pitch. Because honestly the last pitch doesn't count anymore, it is all about the next pitch.* |
| Put yourself in my shoes | Lack of understanding for what specialist do, lack of specialist coach | *I am the other punter on the team's coach and he is my coach. If he is doing bad one day, I have to show him what he is doing wrong because the other coaches have no idea.* |
| Positive team culture, leadership, and bond | Positive leadership style, Bond between specialists, Positive team culture | *Coach is very encouraging. If you sit and talk to him and tell I'm struggling, after practice he'll stay and hit ground balls extra, he'll throw a front toss. He wants everyone to do well. He cares 100%.* |
| Subtheme: When it's negative, it's toxic | Injury changes perspective, Position can lead to levels | *That was one of the main reasons why I transferred because I wasn't going to get to* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | of isolation, Toxic team culture | *play because after I had surgery they kind of tossed me to the side.* |
| Socialization of sport | Fan of the Game, Influenced by family, Family support | *My sister played soccer. She's 10 years older than me so I grew up watching her play. She was at a higher level. She was fifteen when I was five so I would see her play high school soccer. I thought it was really cool. She definitely influenced me to start playing.* |
| Sport is foundational in my life | Transition, Sport has shaped who I am, Sport is foundation for identity | *I think softball has been a huge part of my life. I've learned a lot from it as well, not just the wins and losses and everything to do with the sport. I've learned life lessons.* |

*Appendix 9*

**Participant Academic Demographics**

| Participant | Age | Race | Gender | Academic Classification |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anna | 22 | Caucasian | Female | Senior |
| Bethany | 19 | *Bi-Racial | Female | Sophomore |
| Catherine | 21 | Caucasian | Female | Senior |
| Derek | 21 | Caucasian | Male | Senior |
| Ethan | 19 | Caucasian | Male | Freshman |
| Fred | 19 | Caucasian | Male | Sophomore |
| Gary | 19 | Caucasian | Male | Freshman |
| Henry | 21 | Caucasian | Male | Freshman |
| Irene | 18 | Caucasian | Female | Freshman |
| Jared | 20 | Caucasian | Male | Sophomore |
| Kevin | 22 | Caucasian | Male | Senior |
| Mary | 20 | *Bi-Racial | Female | Junior |
| Nancy | 19 | Caucasian | Female | Sophomore |
| Olivia | 20 | Caucasian | Female | Sophomore |
| Quinn | 22 | Caucasian | Female | Senior |
| Rita | 20 | Caucasian | Female | Sophomore |
| Sarah | 21 | Caucasian | Female | Junior |
| Travis | 20 | Caucasian | Male | Sophomore |
| Vivian | 19 | Caucasian | Female | Freshman |
| Victor | 19 | African-American | Male | Sophomore |
| Will | 20 | Caucasian | Male | Junior |

**Indicates Bi-Racial athlete-Identified as Caucasian & Mexican*

*Appendix 10*

**Participant Athletic Demographics**

| Participant | Athletic Percent &Division | Sport & Position | Age Specialized In Sport | Age Specialized in Position |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anna | 50%: DI | W. Soccer; Goalie | 16 | 11 |
| Bethany | 80%: DI | Softball; Pitcher | 7 | 9 |
| Catherine | 100%: DI | Softball; Pitcher | 5 | 8 |
| Derek | *NC; DI | Football; Punter | 18 | 18 |
| Ethan | 0; DI | Football; Punter | 16 | 17 |
| Fred | 25%; DI | Baseball; Pitcher | 12 | 15 |
| Gary | 35%; DI | M. Soccer; Goalie | 4 | 14 |
| Henry | *NC; DI | M. Hockey; Goaltender | 15 | 14 |
| Irene | DIII | Softball; Pitcher | 14 | 10 |
| Jared | DIII | Baseball; Pitcher | 4 | 10 |
| Kevin | DIII | Baseball; Pitcher | 11 | 16 |
| Mary | DIII | Soccer; Goalie | 15 | 10 |
| Nancy | DIII | Lacrosse; Goalie | 10 | 12 |
| Olivia | DIII | Soccer; Goalie | 10 | 12 |
| Quinn | DIII | Lacrosse; Goalie | 15 | 15 |
| Rita | 21%; DII | Softball; Pitcher | 9 | 10 |
| Sarah | DIII | W. Hockey; Goaltender | 7 | 9 |
| Travis | DIII | Baseball; Pitcher | 5 | 15 |
| Vivian | 40%; DII | Softball; Pitcher | 8 | 9 |
| Victor | DIII | Soccer; Goalie | 4 | 12 |
| Will | 33%; DI | Baseball; Pitcher | 15 | 16 |

**Indicates the participants did not disclose athletic percentage*

## VITA

Allison Smith is originally from Daleville, VA. Her research focus is the holistic care of student-athletes, particularly looking at their psychological and physiological state after transitioning out of sport, the phenomenon of position specialization, work-life balance in athletics, as well as the role of women in intercollegiate athletics. Allison earned her Bachelor's of Science in Communication with an emphasis in Journalism and her Master's of Art in Sport Administration from Wingate University. While at Wingate, Allison served an admission counselor to student-athletes as well as a graduate assistant to NCAA Compliance. Allison played collegiate varsity softball for four years. Allison was the starting pitcher at Wingate University for three years as well as an scholar-athlete awardee. Upon completion of tenure at the University of Tennessee, Allison has received a second Master's degree in Kinesiology in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior, 2 publications, 3 accepted manuscripts, 10 research projects under revision or in process, and over 40 international, national, or regional presentations. Upon graduation in May, Allison will receive a doctorate in Philosophy in Kinesiology and Sport Studies.